

EMILIE AUTUMN

THE  
ASYLUM

FOR WAYWARD VICTORIAN GIRLS









# Forward

*Awareness is the sensory of sanity, for once you hear the screaming,  
it never stops.*

Perfume was first created to mask the stench of foul and offensive odors...

Spices and bold flavorings were created to mask the taste of putrid and rotting meat...

What then was music created for?

Was it to drown out the voices of others, or the voices within ourselves?

I think I know.

I remember when I was still a child how I was plagued by voices in my head. The voices frightened me, bringing me to tears nearly every night until adolescence, and, as such, I was always dehydrated. I lived each day dreading the night to come, when my limbs would be seized by a heavy paralysis, the voices growing louder and louder and louder until I couldn't hear you if you were shouting in my ear. Oddly enough, no one believed these voices of mine to be real enough to warrant looking into, and so I had no choice but to find some way to overcome this nightly terror on my own.

After the first few years, the voices began to manifest even during the day. I remember standing in the doorway to my bedroom one afternoon and beginning to cry. I must have made a noise of some sort because my grandmother, who was in the kitchen at the other end of our long hallway (this was the only time I ever saw her), asked me if I was all right. Having already learned to hide my feelings if only to preserve my six-year-old dignity, I called back to my grandmother in my calmest voice, telling her that I was fine, and that I had only bitten my lip. Naturally, she believed me.

As long as I live, I will never forget the night when I lay in my bed, and, screaming for help, sobbing, and covering my ears having failed to produce any result, I tried the only thing left... I played music in my head. I played the most beautiful piece of music my eight-year-old mind could comprehend: Pachelbel's Canon in D. Of course, to most people, this work has become as trite and empty as the bride wearing white, having been played at weddings ad nauseum. But, to me, it was the sound of heaven; all planets aligned, all spheres throughout the entire universe moving together in perfect accord. And even though anything so utterly perfect always made me cry, it didn't matter. Canon in D was the sound of "making sense," and it may have saved my life.

In the battle between musical order and terrifying chaos, musical order won out every time. Each night this war was waged, and, while the voices didn't stop coming to me, I had my secret weapon, and I applied it swiftly, letting the glorious, endless repetition of Canon in D unfold like a blanket that covered the voices and smothered them into silence.

The battlefield of my sleep was thus occupied until I first began to bleed, and, by then, the voices were the least of my problems. Of the few friends I have ever divulged this story to, most have suggested that my voices may have been angry spirits haunting me, or remnants of a past life, and that their eventual disappearance meant that they had moved on and were at last at peace. The myriad shrinks I have emptied my pocketbook to ask have had no answer for me at all. But I will always believe that the voices fled my mind in terrified anticipation of what was to come...

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## Hospital Entry 1: SUICIDE WATCH

It was the dog who found me. I heard him crying outside the bathroom door, but it seemed very far away. I wasn't there anymore; I was lying in a field of tall, soft grass -- tall enough to hide me from anyone who came looking. The grass moved around me, but there was no sound; I was like a fish lying at the bottom of my cozy aquarium, amongst the sea anemones and dwarf hairgrass. I felt a soft blanket of tree-filtered sunlight wash over me, and I wanted to sleep forever. I felt no fear, no panic; I felt relieved...relieved that I had made my decision and gone through with it, and now there was nothing left to do but wait and lay, wait and lay, wait and lay... All my highs and lows, ups and downs, "TO BEs or NOT TO BEs" were over at last. I had no regrets. I was at peace, and that was a sensation I hadn't known until that moment. I was at peace. I was at peace. I was at peace...

Then, there were arms lifting me up, voices screaming in my ears, and I was being shaken violently while hydrogen peroxide was poured down my throat. There was no sunlight, no grass -- just a dirty bathroom floor, and all I wanted was to go back to sleep.

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I am standing in the back of the line at the Emergency Room. I am looking around at the other emergency cases ahead of me, standing if they are well enough, sitting in plastic chairs in plaster corners if they are not, and I feel like a fraud. I'm not bleeding. I can walk. And yet it seems that it is absolutely imperative that I be here NOW, because my shrink said so, because the legal system that the shrink answers to said so, because everybody said so.

I've been bribed.

I would never have come willingly had I not been threatened with the immediate cutoff of my drug supply. And just as a breakup is something that should never be done by phone, neither is being informed that you need to go to the insane asylum. But it was.

Shrink: I can't see you anymore until you check yourself into a mental hospital.

Me: Why?

Shrink: Because the moment you tell me that you attempted suicide, I have no choice but to insist that you check yourself into the nearest mental health facility. You'll be kept under watch until the doctors say you can go, which is a minimum of seventy-two hours. Until you've done that, I can't see you, and I certainly can't refill your prescriptions.

Me: Um...wait just a second. Firstly, you asked me how I've been these last couple of weeks and I gave you an unfortunately honest answer. And secondly, I'm completely out of drugs.

Shrink: Then you'd better get yourself to the hospital today. They'll give you the drugs you need while you're there, and you can come in to see me as soon as they release you.

Me: But can't I just come in and talk to you now? I'm sure that would make everything alright. I mean, I'm not crazy...at least, not in the way this looks like. There are real reasons, valid reasons why I did this to myself, and, crazy or not, I stand by them. I believe anyone could have done the same in my place.

Shrink: I do understand, and I know what you're going through and what brought you to this place, but, Emilie, you're an extremely intelligent and talented young woman, and it's my job to make sure that you're safe so that you can go on and do all the things you are supposed to do with your life. You need to be in a place where you can get better, and, from everything you've told me, that it not where you are. So, no, you can't come in to see me. Or, rather, you can, but if you do, you won't need a ride home because there will be an ambulance waiting to take you to the hospital directly from my office.

Me: So, basically, you are refusing to give me any more drugs until I agree to check myself into a psych ward, even though we both know that, within forty-eight hours, I will be a suicidal lunatic running into the street in the hopes of getting hit by at least one car if I don't get the drugs? If I say "no, I'm not going" are you comfortable with that outcome?

Shrink: Look, Emilie, we're here to help you, and I think that being under this kind of supervised care is exactly what you need right now. This could be very good for you. Most people that come out of this program feel that it had been beneficial to them.

Me: Most people? Really? Are you just saying that and it's actually a prison?

Shrink: No, it's not a prison. Of course, some patients feel like it is, but it's not.

Me: Dear god...only seventy-two hours?

Shrink: Seventy-two hours minimum.

Me: No. No, this is not going to work...I have shows coming up. Fuck, I have a record to finish...

Shrink: Then you'd better check yourself in there this morning.

Me: Well...it sounds like I have no choice.

Shrink: Not really. Call me when they release you. And, Emilie...good luck.

The thing is, it's not his fault; I should never have said anything, for there is nothing so unwise in this world as telling the truth. Despite the fact that the only place where I could breath was in his office, I should have realized that my doctor wasn't my friend -- he was my doctor, and that meant he had responsibilities to more than just me. I'm a big girl; I should have known that his job was at stake the moment I told him my life was in danger. From some paved over part of my mind, I heard the warning words of the social worker who had screened me when I first walked into the Mental Health Center months ago.

"Hi, Emilie. It's pronounced 'Em-ill-ee,' right? So, I understand that you are bipolar -- manic depressive -- and that you've been having a really rough time with it lately."

Did she just say "lately?" And why the odd emphasis on "are?" Was there a test?

"Family history of bipolar disorder?"

"Yes."

"Family history of suicide?"

"Yes, but is it really that simple?"

"Maybe." She continues, "So, what's been going on? Have you ever felt suicidal?"

"Yes. That's why I'm here."

"But you're not feeling suicidal today, are you?"

"Yes, that's why I'm here. It was the Los Angeles Suicide Hotline that gave me this address."



"Hmm, well, that's a problem because, if you tell me you're suicidal, then I have no choice but to prevent you from leaving the premises, and to call for an ambulance to come to the center immediately and take you to the nearest hospital for monitoring."

"Monitoring?"

"Suicide watch."

Here I hesitate because I've had plenty of experience with non-institutionalized suicide watch, and I've found that being watched while suicidal may indeed prevent one from committing suicide, but it does nothing whatever to prevent one from wanting to commit suicide. In fact, as there is no actual medical treatment involved, suicide watch is nothing more than being watched while one contemplates suicide, rather than being allowed the dignity to contemplate it in privacy, and, if "hell is others," then company is never going to make a suicidal person feel any better.

"And I would be both taken and held against my will?"

"If you tell me you're feeling suicidal right now, today, this very minute, then yes."

"Then I'm not suicidal."

"You're not suicidal right now?"

"No. Not at all."

The line between living and dying is surprisingly thin, and so, apparently, is the line between roaming miserably free and being abducted from a doctor's office by one misplaced word. I can only imagine what my fate would be if I didn't speak the Queen's English, because even grammatical errors could get one institutionalized before one ever knew what was happening. We make eye contact, the social worker and I, and I know that she is letting me slide.

Of course, that was my downfall; her kindness predisposed me to believe that these people understood, and that whatever psychiatrist I may be assigned to would understand also. After all, it was my first time in such a hardcore mental health facility, and I was under the impression that this place existed precisely so that I could have a safe place to go and talk to someone should I feel suicidal -- not so that I would be put away for even saying the word. And how was I to know that there are magic words you don't touch? Land mines that will blow your life away if you so delusional, and the generally fucked up -- not grandma's Christmas dinner. Fuck, the suicide hotline really steered me wrong on this one...remind me to take them off my speed-dial.

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"What are you here for?" says a woman in minty-green scrubs, and sounding a smidgeon impatient about it. She is approaching me with a clipboard. I'm still at the back of the line, so she's probably come to ask what the hell I think I'm doing here, and why do I look like I've just come from a costume ball, and why am I wearing boots with skulls on them because it's bloody morbid and dying people shouldn't see things like that, and--

"I'm suicidal," I announce.

Oh my. I sounded almost proud about that. And I'm smiling. God, maybe I do belong here.

The nurse looks as though she doesn't believe me, and I don't blame her. I'll try again.

"What I mean is, I tried to kill myself, so my doctor made me check myself in here or else he will cut off my medication."

I don't think I've ever sounded this stupid in my life. However, this does the trick, and the nurse marches me right past the front of the line and into a tiny examination room where another nurse tucked safely behind a desk orders me to sit down. Left alone with nurse number two, I fill out a form while answering her questions concerning the

chain of events that have brought me to this point, which I neatly list for her in perfect order. The completed form having been taken away, the nurse now takes my vitals without responding at all to what I've just told her. I don't think she's heard a bit of what I've been saying; it was as unimpressive to her as someone explaining how they'd scraped their knee.

"First I was running, and then I tripped, and then my knee was bleeding, and it wouldn't stop, so my mum sent me in for stitches, and here I am."

"First I was born, and then I was molested, and then I was stalked, and then I was raped, all the while being mentally terrorized by the people who were supposed to love me, and then I ran away, and then I was depressed, and then I was suicidal, well, actually, I've been depressed and suicidal since I was four, and, oh, did I mention that my ancestry is positively littered with lunatics and girls who fall down rabbit holes, and then I tried to jump in front of a train but there were too many people watching, and yes, I'm a show pony, clearly, but the train option is just vulgar anyhow, and then I finally got myself medicated even though I didn't want to because I don't take drugs and I was afraid that my personality would be erased, but then my doctor tried to fuck me, and then I was diagnosed with manic depression which really explained a lot, and then I compared brands of rat poison but didn't like the idea of supporting any company that obtains its revenue from the annihilation of one of our most charming and intelligent creatures, and then I was emotionally slaughtered by the only person I'd ever trusted with the care and feeding of the heart I never knew I had until it was dead, and then I pulled an Ophelia and tried to drown myself in the lake behind his house, and then I was put on more pills, and then I was on THE pill so that I couldn't get pregnant no matter what because I have severe tocophobia, which is the mortal fear of pregnancy, but you probably knew that already, and I would never in good conscience pass on my genetics anyway, and then I found out that I was three-and-a-half months pregnant even though I was on THE pill that is supposed to prevent one from getting pregnant no matter what, and the boy involved was appallingly cruel about it all, and so I tried to buy cyanide but that's not as easy as it sounds, and then I had the abortion and I was wide awake the whole time and it was indescribably violent, like being raped by steel, and I said 'sorry' to the baby, and then I looked across the shabby operating room and saw a plastic bag full of everything they'd just sucked out of me because the nurses had forgotten to hide it, and I was completely alone through all of this forever and ever and ever, so then I took all of my sleeping pills at once because I've actually been dead for years and years and years and years and years but my body just doesn't realize it yet, and then my doctor sent me in for suicide watch, and here I am. I hope it hasn't started without me."

Blood pressure and body temperature looking well enough, a plastic hospital bracelet is slapped onto my wrist (much higher quality than those at rock concerts, and virtually unbreakable -- you concert promoters out there should seriously look into these), and, fancy that! It already has my name on it. Emilie Autumn Liddell. Yes, that Liddell. You can see now why I don't use my last name.

Everything done, I would have thought I'd be off to a hospital room or tied up to a pole or something, but, alas, it's back into the waiting room for me. There is something slightly dangerous in the air, and I don't feel that my new plastic bracelet is giving me the "street cred" that I'd hoped it might. I've been given another form to fill out, so I take my clipboard and choose a torn vinyl chair in the middle of the room, having learned the hard way that a room's more remote edges are the worst place one can be.

I can explain: If you want to be safe, walk in the middle of the street. I'm not joking. You've been told to look both ways before crossing, and that the sidewalk is your friend, right? Wrong. I've spent years walking sidewalks at night. I've looked around me when it was dark, when there were men following me, creeping out of alleyways, attempting to goad me into speaking to them and shouting obscenities at me when I wouldn't, and I suddenly realized that the only place left to go was the middle of the street. But why would I risk it? Because the odds are in my favor. In the States, someone is killed in a car accident on average every 12.5 minutes, while someone is raped on average every 2.5 minutes. Even when factoring in that, one, I am generously including ALL car-related accidents and not just those involving pedestrians, and, two, that the vast majority of rapes still go unreported, and I should know, I think my logic in this case speaks for itself. And, thus, this is now the way I live my life: out in the open, in the middle of everything, because the middle of the street is actually the safest place to walk.



My suspicions are confirmed -- the nurse has not registered anything I've said in describing my reasons for being here on this fine and sunny Hollywood morning, and so she's given me this form to fill out instead, just to make life easier for everybody. Faced with the dauntingly vague and unsympathetic "PRESENTING PROBLEM" field, I print, "suicidal, unable to function reliably in every day life" -- an appropriately robotic description of an unspeakably painful condition: I cannot function reliably.

I am mystified by the number of badge-sporting policemen who are guarding the premises, the patients, or both. Looking around, I fail to see the threat, but there must be one or else the state wouldn't have been able to justify the allotment of public tax dollars for their employ, and, as I mentioned, there is a faint odor of "wrongness" in the building, so perhaps the guns are necessary...perhaps.

Looking up from this page, I notice a sign on the sickeningly lavender wall in front of me. "SEE SECURITY FOR RESTROOM KEY." We are not trusted to visit the restroom by ourselves, or at least without the consent of the armed guards. Why do I feel that agreeing to turn myself in was not such a good idea?

I am wearing an antique pink Victorian glove on my left hand; my writing hand is gloved in black and white knit stripes. It is warm, but I like to keep my hands covered.

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I am in my bed, in my room, in the Emergency Ward, and my stockings are all I have left. The boy I used to think I loved was kind enough to drive me here, but he left without saying goodbye, and I despise myself for being surprised at this. Before being left alone, I was put through three comprehensive security checks, each by a different guard. While I had no idea that taking all of my sleeping pills would reduce me to the status of common criminal in the eyes of the state, I certainly feel much less suicidal now that three men with guns have gone through my underwear.

This is the checklist of what I brought with me to the hospital:

1. Several books (I had figured that, in between all of the miraculous therapy and marvelously beneficial treatments I would be privileged to, there might be some down time.)
2. My notebooks (If I cannot relentlessly document my surroundings as though I were witnessing life from somewhere up on the ceiling, I tend to go a bit loony...shocking, I know.)
3. Pens/pencils (In order not only to write but also to sketch properly, I require both.)
4. Cell phone (Do you really think I'm coming to a place like this without being able to call for backup?)
5. Two changes of clothes (It's me we're talking about. This is conservative.)
6. Basic toiletries (Hairbrush, toothbrush, lip gloss, etc.)
7. The clothes on my back (Coat, dress, gloves, boots, black rubber bracelets, striped stockings.)

This is the checklist of what I was allowed to keep with me:

1. ~~Several books~~
2. ~~My notebooks~~
3. ~~Pens/pencils~~
4. ~~Cell phone~~
5. ~~Two changes of clothes~~
6. ~~Basic toiletries~~
7. The clothes on my back (Coat, dress, gloves, boots, black rubber bracelets, striped stockings.)

I'm not stupid. I know exactly what's going on, and I'm not fighting it. If I have to go through this, I will glean from it any small benefit I can receive. I will not fight this. Bring it on. Bring on the cure. Bring on the fucking happy. I'm committed.

Asylum Patient:  
Illness:  
Medication:

## Hospital Entry 2: THE RED CRAYON.

I know I said only a moment ago that I would cooperate and trust in the wisdom of the medical community, but I was perhaps a bit hasty. When my things were taken, the staff had assured me that they would be brought back to me as soon as I was "settled." Now that I am naked beneath a flimsy robe that doesn't close, and lying in a gurney (like a metal slab but less comfortable) with shallow railing on the sides (to keep me from jumping out?), I find that I've been lied to. I am in a solitary room in the Emergency Ward, and my door must be kept wide open at all times. I have the option of either complete darkness or the harsh fluorescent lighting directly above my head -- the kind that triggers my migraines. Scratch that last -- I was mistaken as to my choices: upon asking for the light to be turned off, I am told that the guards need to be able to see into my room. One of these guards crosses my doorway every few minutes just to make sure that I haven't hung myself with my own hair. I ask him when I will be given my things back, and the anxiety rises in my ulcer-ridden stomach when he tells me unsympathetically that I won't.

"But I'll have no communication with the outside world if I can't have my cell phone. How will anybody know where I am? How will they know I'm all right?"

"You can't use your phone down here. We can't have you just talking to people whenever you want to."

This argument is somewhat desperate on my part since I know that there is no one within a thousand miles who would come to visit me anyway, let alone break me out if I couldn't take it anymore. But what if something horrible happens to me? What if I need to call 911? Oh, wait...I'm already at 911. Never mind.

"What about my books? My pencils?"

"You can't have pencils in here."

"Pens! I have pens!"

"Can't have pens either, Miss."

"How in the bloody hell can I hurt myself with a pen? Seriously now. I can't have one pen? It's fucking felt tip!"

The guard shakes his head.

"Nothing longer than it is wide, is that it?"

Slight chuckle. "Just about."

"Look, I'm going to go crazy in here...wrong word...I need just one book, and that's it. I promise you, Sir, I am going to go completely and utterly mad if I can't at least read. I've been here for hours and hours and I'm halfway there already. Give me a manual on CPR or something!"

I am shamelessly appealing to the guard's workload, assuming that he wouldn't want to be in here restraining yet another lunatic if he didn't have to, but, upon examining his physique, I determine that restraining lunatics is probably what he was bred for.

"OK, Miss, I'll ask the nurse if you can have one of your books."

I am in an absolute panic now. My heart is pounding. I have no privacy. I have no contact with the world outside. I have nothing to do except rot under these buzzing



fluorescent lights in disgrace, unable to think with all of the screaming, the chaos, the absolute bedlam (pun intended) being rolled back and forth on stretchers outside my door. I have no way of knowing what time it is, or how long I've been here. No one has come to talk to me, nor has the book I begged for been delivered. I am sinking deeper into the snake pit with every breath, and I know now that I am in the wrong place. Nobody is speaking to me. Nobody is helping me, which is all just fine because I didn't want to be here in the first place, but, now that I am, I know without any doubt that there has been a terrible mistake. I am not a patient. I am a prisoner. And what's more criminal: taking all of your sleeping pills at once, or sending a suicidal girl to a place like this?

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Hours crawl by and I suspect it must be late evening by now, though I have no real way of knowing. A few doctors have come in over the course of the day to ask me how I ended up here. I refine my story just a bit each time I tell it, because, not only do I realize that I am confusing them, I'm exhausting myself, and, frankly, I'm tired of hearing my own voice. I have never liked the sound of my voice. No one has asked me if I need anything. I'm not allowed to get out of this bed, but I know that I need water, and I still have nothing to do but grow more suicidal by the minute. It's been over twenty-four hours since I've eaten anything, but I don't mind that because I couldn't possibly eat anything anyway -- not in here.

At last, a nurse arrives, and I ask her if I can have my books back. It is clear that neither she nor anyone else had ever received my book request of hours ago, but nothing surprises me anymore, and I resume my begging. Some time later, the same nurse returns with a disposable plastic bag branded with the hospital's logo and containing all of my belongings, as if to taunt me with its entire contents when, as she now informs me, I can only keep a single item. The nurse tells me to choose quickly, and I select one of my favorite history books on the resurgence of the bubonic plague in Victorian England. In my mousiest, most heart wrenching (or so I hope) tone, I ask the nurse if I couldn't just keep one of my notebooks and pens as well, but she refuses, adding that I'm not even supposed to have the book -- I should be resting, not reading. Seeing that none of my charms could ever hope to penetrate this soulless shell of a woman no doubt hardened by years of attending to violent or, worse, annoying patients, I surrender. I unpin my hair, shaking it out and making a mirrorless attempt at smoothing it back to something that looks more dignified than I feel. Changing my mind, I decide to leave it loose; I even tangle it a bit so that I look half as crazy as I'm being treated. I imagine that this is what Ophelia looked like -- sane but crazy, crazy but sane... The nurse makes one final pass around the room, checking for hidden pens, shoelaces, and other deadly weapons.

"If one is not allowed to read, write, communicate with anyone, or even walk around one's own room, what, then, is one supposed to do here?"

The nurse comes to my bedside and snatches up the hairpins lying in my lap before turning to leave. She glances back at me from the doorway.

"Sleep," she says.

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My first night in the Emergency Room, and, in the antiseptic glow of the bustling hallway outside, I can see that the night staff is a bit younger than the day-shifters. Figures. Who would want the graveyard shift if they had the seniority to choose otherwise? And why is it called the "graveyard" shift anyway? Is that a throwback to the days when cemetery staff would watch over the freshly buried bodies to prevent grave-robbers from digging them up? Are we the freshly buried bodies? In any case, the attitude of the night staff is a bit softer as well; they haven't yet had the time to become harsh. A young nurse with an Alice band and quiet brown eyes comes to administer my sleeping pills as well as another handful of drugs (a few extra as I am by now in such a state of anxiety that my entire body is trembling uncontrollably). I ask this new nurse, "girl to girl," if there is anything I can write with -- anything at all on the premises that I could be allowed. She looks doubtful, but I can't let this opportunity slip, so I exclaim, "A Sharpie! What about a Sharpie? I couldn't possibly do anything dangerous with that, could I?"

The young nurse's brow furrows and I see that she has not altogether ruled it out.

"I'll have to go and check the office, but yeah, I don't see how that could be a problem, and I'm sure we have one somewhere. I'll go check."

I fall back on my pillowless bed (did I mention we're not allowed to have pillows? Has

anyone ever smothered themselves with a pillow? I sense an alternate ending to "Othello" coming on...) and exhale for the first time in months. It is only one breath, and I know it won't last, but I want just one selfish moment to bask in the warmth of someone doing something nice for me. And, even if my nurse doesn't succeed in her quest for the holy Sharpie, at least I would know that she had tried. A few breaths later and my nurse is back, a grin puffing up her freckled cheeks. She holds up for my inspection a single red crayon. I burst out laughing, and once I start, I can't stop.

"So this is what it's come to!" I gasp, through hysterical tears.

"I'm sorry," says my nurse, "I couldn't find a Sharpie, but I did find this crayon left over from one of the children's rooms. Will it be useful at all?"

Snatching the crayon from her hand, I tell her it's perfect, and I'm sure my excessive gratitude must frighten her, as it would frighten me, but she is too kind to show it.

IN SUMMATION!

My pens and pencils having been taken from me for fear that I will use them to harm myself, I have taken to begging, and my prize?

I HAVE BEEN AWARDED A RED CRAYON!!!

I instantly decide that I will use the red crayon until there is almost nothing left (because I may never have the chance to plead for another), but that I will then save it and keep it amongst my treasures for all of my life, however long or short that may be.

LISTENING TO ME

WRONG

ALREADY

THEY ARE NOT

I DO NOT HAVE A PLAN TO OVERDOSE... I DID OVERDOSE.

State of California - Health and Human Services Agency  
INVOLUNTARY PATIENT ADVISEMENT  
(TO BE READ AND GIVEN TO THE PATIENT AT TIME OF ADMISSION)

Name of Facility: [REDACTED] Neuropsychiatric Hospital

Patient's Name: [REDACTED]

Section 5157 (c) and (d) of the Welfare and Institutions Code requires that each person admitted to this facility be given specific information orally and in writing, and a record of the advisement.

My name is: [REDACTED] My position here is: M.D.

You are being placed in this psychiatric facility because it is the opinion of the professional staff, result of a mental disorder, you are: (check applicable)

☒ Dangerous to yourself ☐ Dangerous to others ☐ Gravely Disabled (unable to take care of your own food, clothing or shelter)

(Document specific evidence which substantiates reason for hold):  
We feel this is true because you are depressed and suicidal, have a plan to overdose.

You will be held for a period of up to 72 hours. This does include weekends or holidays.  
Your 72-hour period will begin: [REDACTED] 2 pm (Time and Date)

Your 72-hour evaluation and treatment period will end at: [REDACTED] 2 pm (Time and Date)

During these 72 hours you will be evaluated by the hospital staff, and the treatment you receive may be decided that you need continued treatment, you can be held for a longer period of time. If you are held more than 72 hours, you have the right to a lawyer and a qualified interpreter and a hearing before a judge. State law presumes you to be competent regardless of whether you have been evaluated or treated for a mental disorder as a voluntary or involuntary patient. Good cause for Incomplete Advisement



Hospital Entry 3: OBSERVATIONS BY THE CRIMINALLY INSANE

UPON APPRECIATING MY RED CRAYON BEFORE IT HAS BEGUN TO DULL:

The Crayon must make other writing utensils extremely jealous, for, although the pen and even the lowly pencil are far superior in the sport of clear lettering and also of writing very, very small, they simply cannot compare to the smooth, waxy glide of the Crayon.

This is me sharpening my precious Crayon...

It only works slightly.

I was once the sort who prized books above all else, and would never mark on or dog-ear the pages (what kind of dog, I wonder), wishing them to be as perfect on the fifth read as they were on the first. However! My notebooks having been absconded, I have no choice but to immortalize my thoughts in crayon around the margins of my book about the plague. What first felt like sacrilege has become quite thrilling because everyone knows you can't erase crayon. I am taking ownership of this book; I am stating that I don't care who reads it after me; I am validating my thoughts by scrawling them right next to, almost overlapping, those of someone I admire; I am being a pompous, self-important ass, and I don't care! What will be next for me? Pens? Paper airplanes? Somebody tie me down, I'm out of control!!!

In my manic frenzy, I have worn my crayon down to the nub, depicting my admission into this insane asylum in the margins until there are no margins left. Hand cramped and palm stained red, my equine dosage of sleeping pills is finally kicking in, and I'm gone...

SLEEPING PILLS ARE KICKING IN,  
AND I'M HERE IN THE LOONY BIN...

MY FIRST REAL DAY, BEFORE BECOMING DEAF TO THE GUARDS AND THEIR CHATTER:

I don't know what time it is. Since the clamor outside my door never ceases, and it goes without saying that windows do not exist down here, there are no patterns by which to judge the time. But, considering that my sleeping pills generally knock me out for at least a few hours, and also considering that the two guards posted outside my door are new, at least to my eyes, I am guessing that it must be very early morning.

As much as I resent their presence, their peering, their weapons, their very maleness, I do sympathize with the security guards outside my room. They must be as bored as I am, and, in that, we are united. From the unobstructed view through my pointless doorway, I can see the heavy, boot-shod foot of a guard tapping rapidly upon the speckled linoleum floor common to all hospitals in the known

world and possibly beyond. I think how lucky he is to be tapping on the very floor I am not even allowed to stand upon unless it be for the purpose of taking an escorted trip to the bathroom and back, a guard standing directly outside the bathroom door from start to finish, and knocking loudly if I've been inside longer than three minutes. Overflowing with self-pity, I also ruminate that at least the guards can banter and talk bullshit with each other, and they are. At last I know jealousy.

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FROM THE EMERGENCY ROOM BED IN WHICH I AM HELD UNTIL THERE IS ROOM FOR ME IN THE PSYCH WARD UPSTAIRS:

Early morning vitals having been taken, and another handful of pills having been choked down (I have always had a difficult time swallowing pills, except for when I'm overdosing of course, and having a nurse hovering over me as I attempt to chase them down with a tiny paper cupful of water doesn't much help), I am again left alone. Having made it through my first night with a bit of drug induced sleep, I am feeling just as miserable, but slightly less anxious. Or is that just the fight in me dying? In any case, it doesn't last, because, when a random doctor I haven't met before appears in my doorway and informs me that I will be stuck down here in the Emergency Ward for a few days more while they wait for a bed to open up in the Psych Ward upstairs (he says that nobody really knows how long it will take), the old panic sets in again. I'm cold.

"So, I won't actually be 'treated' until I can be moved upstairs, which means my seventy-two hour watch won't start until that day?"

"Yes, that what we're looking at right now."

That's what we're looking at right now.

"But I was forced to come here on the condition that it was seventy-two hours with good behavior. Nobody told me that I'd be waiting for god knows how long before my time card is punched. That would have made all the difference," I tell the doctor, frustrated and confused. "It's not my fault that you don't have a room. Somebody should have told me that ahead of time -- if not before I showed up, then as soon as I checked in, or, at the very least, before my fucking ride took off."

"OK, but there's really nothing we can do for now until a bed opens up."

I am really starting to not like this phrase "until a bed opens up," or, "as soon as a bed opens up," or, "there are no beds available right now." It's creepy, and it implies that the only thing I'm really here for is a bed, that the bed is the treatment, that I am here to lie down and stay down like a lobotomized fucking invalid, and I'm not liking this one bit. I'm starting to shake again.

"Please, Doctor, nobody told me this. I have shows to do that I absolutely cannot cancel. I have a record to finish and it's already late, and I know you don't give a fuck and you're probably thinking, 'well that's what you get for taking all of your sleeping pills, you selfish, crazy bitch' -- I mean, god knows that's what everybody else thinks -- but I may have already destroyed my career, and, just in case there is anything left to salvage, I have to get out of here in three days, or I have to get out now."

"Again, Emilie, there's nothing we can do. We can't legally discharge you once you've been checked in, and we have no way of knowing when you'll be moved upstairs, so I suggest that you try to relax and get as much sleep as possible. You're going to get some really great care when you do finally get upstairs, and, besides, I'm sure you realize that your career is relatively unimportant compared to your health. You've got to handle this first, before you get back on stage, before you do anything else."

Bad argument. My career is the only thing holding me together; take me off the stage and you take away my life. Unwilling to take this lying down, I move to sit up in my bed, and the thin sheet they call a "blanket" falls away from my left thigh. I quickly cover the cuts with my hand.

"I just can't quite process this," I say, unable to give up until I either get my



way or receive an answer that I can understand. "I didn't hurt anyone but myself, which, as far as I'm concerned, is my right to do, but see, now that I've said that, you'll probably add more days onto my sentence, right? I didn't hurt anyone else, I've done everything I was told, the deal is not at all what I was led to believe, and now you're telling me I'm here indefinitely? Have I been tricked?"

"No, you haven't been tricked. This is the way it works, Emilie, for everybody, and I can't help that your psychiatrist didn't explain it to you completely, but the fact remains that this is where you should be right now. OK then, I have to--"

"If I can't leave," I interrupt, "can somebody come and get me?"

"No," he flatly says, walking toward the door.

"What if I promise to come back? I'll sign something! I'll come back when you have a fucking 'bed' free!"

The doctor exits my room and I hear his footsteps travel down the hall, away from me and my pleas. It is at this moment that I know my freedom is gone.

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I have already described how everything was taken from me that could possibly represent a threat to myself or to anyone else that might come into my room, were I to become violent. I have also watched as odd nurses at odd hours materialize to search the corners of my cell, as though I could have smuggled something in since the last search, which would be quite a feat indeed considering that I'm not allowed to get out of bed, and which is precisely why I find the following so amusing.

#### PULL ROPE TO CALL NURSE:

Taking my first good, hard look around the place I have just learned might be my address for quite some time, my eyes are instantly drawn to a long, thin string hanging from the wall beside my bed. Above this string is a sign reading "PULL ROPE TO CALL NURSE." My obvious thought is that the string could easily be used as a weapon of self-destruction, and, if I can't have a pencil, then what the fuck? Imagining for a moment that it could even hold my weight, I envision myself knotting the string into a noose and pulling it down around my neck. Then, when the nurse is called as a result of my "pulling the rope," she will enter the room to find my body dangling ironically from the string. That, in a place like this, is pure comedy gold.

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#### UPON THE ARRIVAL OF "KARA," THE CRACK DETOX:

It is god only knows what time (day/week/year), and a truly crazy woman just outside of my room has asked a male nurse for some juice, although "asked" would be a polite term for it. Rushing about his work, the nurse replies, "Sure. You want apple, cranberry, orange?"

"Mix it all up," the woman slurs back.

"Mix it all up?" says the nurse. "OK."

There's no shocking him.

#### ONE HOUR LATER:

The juice lady in the hall outside my room is still spewing her madness at the guards, and they are forced to endure it, at least until she is placed into a cell like mine. Her whole being appears to be wrapped up in the obsession of "being real," which, need I say, is simply awesome. She fluctuates every three minutes (I was going to say five but it's three because I'm counting now) between railing at the guards for being unfair, sobbing and screaming all the while, to thanking them for protecting her in such a gushing, hyperbolic manner as might be mistaken for sarcasm, though I suspect that Miss Nuttersby is not clever enough to produce sarcasm. Oh! This is fantastic! Thank heaven for my Crayon nub! She has just

moaned to the guards, "Ohhhh, I'm just so sexually frustrated..." Whoa. I hope she's tied down. Dear, sweet lord, the Duchess von Nutsberg is quite literally torturing this one poor guard in particular who goes by the name of Devon. She is repeatedly asking him to spell his name, repeatedly, repeatedly, repeatedly... Now she's asking him when his shift is over, presumably so that they might arrange a meeting, the aim of which would undoubtedly be the alleviation of her aforementioned frustration. I am writing down these events literally as they happen. I am but a fledgling journalist, present at one of history's defining moments. I hope they wheel Her Nutsness by my room so that I can see what she looks like; she's been in the hall just beyond my eager view for ages now, and I have developed this image of her based upon the crack addicts I've known and worked with in the past...let us see if I have hit the mark!

Oh no! Ohhhhhhh no! It seems that the Queen of Nutsland is not satisfied with the way Devon has been keeping up his end of the conversation, so she has chosen to demonstrate this by belching loudly (very loudly) at him, and I suppose, indirectly, at all of us. But all is well in the Emergency Ward today; the Nutscracker has returned to the subject of "living in the moment" and "being real," and at last I have something to do besides plot my own demise. Good god, what wonders! And what a lucky girl I am to witness them! I wouldn't dream of being anywhere else right now...

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The excitement of this morning had me quite worn out, but, after a brief period of unconsciousness, I am again reporting new developments taking place in the hallway outside of my room: The President of the Nut O' The Month Club is finally going to get her own room here in the ER, and I take it as a personal attack when the nurses roll her into the cell right next to mine. Don't they know that you ought not to put someone who throws terrifying tantrums next to a suicidal girl? In the cell on my other side, a young man is being restrained; he won't stop screaming, and is physically threatening the staff when they get too close. Walls are thin here, and all doors are as wide open as mine. I can hear everything. I am surrounded. This is just what the voices in my head used to sound like when I was a child. How long until I snap? Or have I already? My cellmates may have taken a lot of drugs, but I tried to kill myself. Which is more insane? No time to ponder thoughts so profound, however, because the Mayor of Cracktown (whose name, if the nurse who just shouted at her is in any way trustworthy, turns out to be Kara) is upset again. She seems to have preferred the hallway because at least there she could talk to the guards and force them to talk back. Despite the open door, Kara is isolated in her room, and the guards are no longer allowed to respond to her when she pelts them with racial epithets. Frustrated by the lack of attention, Kara does the only thing she knows how: she uses her bed as a toilet. She is raving now, screaming at the world that this is what happens when people don't listen to her, and that now she's made a mess they have to deal with, which, in its own psychotic way, is pretty fucking brilliant.

"Hey you fuckers! You goddamned fucking fuckers! Look! I did it! I fucking told you I'd do it!" she roars victoriously.

A moment later, two guards enter Kara's room and drag her, shrieking, down the hall toward the inmate shower while the nurses clean up the filth -- a job they are none too pleased about. It sounds brutal, the way the guards are forcing Kara into the shower, and it probably is, but I have no sympathy for her. I imagine that, if I were one of those guards, I'd probably want to smash her head against a wall. Occasionally, a doctor I don't recognize will enter my room and ask me if I'm still feeling like "hurting myself." I can't take this question seriously anymore.

PULL ROPE  
TO  
CALL NURSE.



Hospital Entry 4: DR. SHARPE or REMEMBRANCES OF EGGS PAST

It is a special day when the small plastic bowl bearing its heavy paste of what appears to be an amalgamation of mucous and glue, but is probably filed in the hospital cookbook somewhere near Vanilla Pudding, is the most appetizing item on the dinner tray. Today is that day.

With each so-called "meal" (the only landmark I have by which to count the hours), my fears of anything served beneath a plastic lid are only compounded. For example, breakfast this morning: A paper plate laden with scrambled eggs -- eggs ne'er graced by whisk nor frying pan, which I know because the dry mound was uniformly yellow without a speck of toasty brown. Such eggs must have come from either a box or a can -- there is simply no other option.

To keep these enigmatic eggs from getting lonely, two shriveled sausage links, which were fortunate enough to escape my judgment if not my ridicule as they were not eligible to be eaten by me, and, as such, were not worth being disgusted by. Not that the eggs were eligible either, not by my usual dietary standards of veganism anyway, but I sensed that a vegan within these walls is an endangered species. Besides, recalling my lovely slab of room temperature ovum, their existence could not possibly be traced to any chicken on god's green.

Remembrances of eggs past are here interrupted by the arrival and elaborate presentation of a cup of tea (yes, tea, my all time favorite form of self-medication) in all its Styrofoam-encased glory. It is my first tea in days, the denial of which no doubt has had something to do with the suspicion that I might burn myself to death by hot water if given the chance. And, yes, even my weak and generic hospital brand black tea bathing in its less than boiling bath, even this lesser-than-chimney-sweep-grade brew is enough to give me one shred of my sanity back -- to make my existence in this changeless and sterile cell one crumb more civilized. Funny thing though -- I had to tell the nurse I'd "die" for a cup of tea before she conceded and I became the proud owner of this disposable vessel of dignity. May it last forever.

But! Back to yesterday's breakfast delights (I'll keep my fast intact, thank you): We've covered the sausage, yes? Then it's onto the toast! How can you fuck up toast? It takes hard work and research, but it is possible. Imagine, if you will, two triangles of very thick egg bread (mmm, more eggs), and then imagine these very triangles sagging drunkenly beneath the weight of some liquid or other in which they had been soaked overnight for my satisfaction. Sickly sweet, they were sponge-like and difficult to tear, more akin to insulation foam than food. It occurred to me that these triangles may have been a failed attempt at French Toast, but, upon further reflection, I concluded that the objects in question bore no more resemblance to French Toast than they did to a jar of dill pickles. All of this said, my Euclidian mysteries were the piece de resistance of my Emergency Room breakfast tray, and, having already suffered through some of the eggs for fear of insulting the chef, I ate the toast with relative pleasure, which is an odd thing to judge relativity by as it is impossible to imagine pleasure of any sort existing within these walls.

What else? An ice cold banana reeking of refrigeration, artificial freshness artificially maintained by its chilly life-support system. How old was this banana really? While I dare not venture a guess, I do believe it could tell us a tale or two. Breaking through its tough and leathery exterior took some effort, and, once inside, I began to question whether it had all been worth it. But, alack the day, vitamins must be had, if not protein and iron, and though I will most assuredly leave this place more anemic than I arrived (which, after an abortion, is a rather serious condition),

at the least, I shall be positively packed with potassium.

But wait, there's more! You know those paper cartons, perfectly square or possibly rectangular, complete with spout that you magically bring into existence by jamming your thumbs into an indented attic beneath its triangular roof (more triangles) and violently pry it apart? Of course you do, everyone does. Now imagine such a carton so short that its height measures less than its width -- so much shorter in fact that it seems a tragic waste of cardboard, fitting snugly into the "why bother?" category. Well, this particular carton contained orange juice, which, I am shocked and delighted to say, was actually orange juice. After a carton of similar shape that I had been given the night before containing "cranberry cocktail" proved to contain exactly thirteen percent juice (and zero percent vodka, so where's the "cocktail?"), one learns not to make assumptions.

LOOK! NEW CRAYON!  
I have just been presented with the gift of  
(get this!) an entire 8-pack of CRAYONS  
of my very, very own! Flattery does indeed  
get you every where (or is it anything?).  
BUT, ALAS! My green is already dull  
after less than a paragraph...  
a pox on CRAYONS -- they are a  
tease and a joke!..

Well, I was planning to end my recounting of yesterday's breakfast by describing to you my sincere guilt over the carton of milk that I was to leave behind, but, can you believe it! I have returned from one of my dreaded restroom trips (more on this later) to find a fresh breakfast tray (the appearance of which is the only way I know it's morning) containing the familiar toast and banana (I've amassed quite a collection of said fruit, and don't tell the nurses as they would undoubtedly take them away for fear that I might stab myself with one), and I think I will go and explore this new offering so that I may return to regale the reader with tales of what appears to be oatmeal...god help me...

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During the interminable days that have gone by, I am forgotten by all but the chief resident psychiatrist, Dr. Sharpe. Don't bother rolling your eyes at his name because I've already done it for you; when he arrived to examine me on my second afternoon here, I couldn't keep from giggling as we shook hands.

"What?" he asked, looking almost offended.

"Oh, nothing, just your name, in a place like this...it's right out of a movie...I'm sorry, I've just realized that I'm in the insane asylum and everything that isn't funny at all suddenly is. Like at weddings and funerals, you know?"

Dr. Sharpe's forehead smoothed as he smiled knowingly and, leaning against the wall, slid down to a crouching position in the studied posture of someone who wants to tell you, "I'm not just your doctor, I'm also your friend. Oh, and I'm not just your



riend, I'm your sexy doctor friend." Thing is, Doctor? Unfortunately. Sexy? No.

"Ah, I get it," said he. "Well, the truth is that I'm not the one doing the pricking around here -- I deal more with the..."

At this, he tapped his fingertips to his head, twirling his forefinger in the international symbol for "crazy," which I thought was overstepping the boundaries just a wee bit, but then what are the boundaries in a place like this? I suppose that, if there are any, they are erected by the doctors and not the patients, so there.

I wasn't laughing anymore, so Dr. S rose and took a step closer to my bed, talking intimately as though we were old friends and I wasn't crazy at all.

"Besides," he said, "just between you and me, I never really got comfortable with the whole 'injection' thing...I'm not really into blood."

As he said this last, the Doctor touched his hand to my arm, playfully pretending to administer an injection. Instinctively, I pulled my knees to my chest, not in modesty but because, if Dr. S was afraid of blood, then he would surely not wish to see the still scarlet lines covering my thighs -- lines I'd carved with tools ranging from razor blades to safety pins.

Remarkably, no one has noticed the cuts yet, but then, I still wear my striped stockings, and they are tall enough to hide most of my self-inflicted wounds. I have begun to feel somehow protected by my legwear, as though it were some kind of armor. I am reminded of a true accounting I had read not long ago of a young girl in the nineteenth century who was the victim of a serial killer. The villain lured the girl up to the attic of her own house where he raped (how original) and murdered her, then set the house on fire in order to destroy the evidence. The strange bit was that, the next day, the house was burned to bits, as was the girl's body, with the exception of her legs which remained completely unmarred beneath her striped stockings. No explanation could be found for this bizarre phenomenon, but, due to this physical evidence, the killer was caught and hanged. I would very much like to have those stockings...

After Dr. Sharpe left my room that day, I remember thinking that, while he seemed likable enough, he just didn't seem like a doctor (whatever that means).

#### SPECIAL NOTE ON CONSTANT INTERRUPTIONS AND THEIR EFFECT ON MY HEALTH:

While maintaining his (too) easy manner, Dr. S has begun to change my mind as to his "likeability." This is not due to any especially offensive act he has committed, but, rather, to a general strangeness of comportment that, while not necessarily inappropriate to all of the patients here, does not suit my present nervous condition in the least. For example, he has an eerie way of peering in suddenly (no doors, remember?) and shocking me out of whatever I am doing ("whatever I am doing" by now consisting primarily of going through page after page of my remaining books, writing in the margins, and then writing over the pages themselves until the original text is no longer discernible). Dr. S's noiseless arrivals and prolonged visits are beginning to make me jumpy and anxious...I had become accustomed to having no privacy, but now I feel like I'm being snuck up on. My stomach is in knots (there's some rather perverse imagery in that metaphor, wouldn't you say?) because of the damage this is doing to my nerves, and so I eat even less now than before. Of course, I can't say that I mind this bit, because I don't feel hunger anyway -- my body is now eating itself.

Late one night, I woke to find Dr. S standing over my bed. When I opened my eyes, he explained that he had been walking by and thought he'd check on me. Just for the record, I'm not as dumb as I look. There's "checking on me" as in suicide watch, and then there's "checking on me" in the way that Dr. Sharpe is now doing. He makes an extended visit to my room at least twice a day, often arriving in a tight t-shirt and jeans instead of his doctor's uniform, and, adopting his signature crouching position against the wall, asks me to tell him about my life, my madness, the things I'm studying in my books, things he claims to find "fascinating," and, in one brief explosion of intelligence, I know exactly what's going on. On my next supervised trip to the bathroom, I look at myself in the tiny, cracked mirror in the hope of seeing some feature, something in my physical appearance that could be remotely alluring, so that I could wipe it out.

I can find nothing.

#### Hospital Entry 5: THE PAPERCLIP

UPON TAKING IN MY SURROUNDINGS IN A MOMENT OF BOREDOM:

Trying to breathe deeply, I scan the room, tuning my senses to the noise outside, determined to be aware of Dr. Sharpe's next approach. Looking down from my gurney to the floor on the right, I spy a large paperclip -- brighter, harder, and, once unfolded, sharper than any pencil they might have let me keep. I want this paperclip quite a lot, in part because I'm not supposed to have it, and in larger part because I am allowed so few belongings that I think, perhaps, I might actually need it for something, if only to make my stash larger. But which is stronger: the desire that it should be mine, or the knowledge that, when they finally pull down my stockings and find the paperclip hidden there, my stay here will be infinitely extended and far less friendly? God, they would probably even take my red crayon away... Perhaps it will be more entertaining simply to wait and see how long it takes for someone to notice the clip and carry it away and out of my sight forever.

#### NOTE FROM THE FUTURE:

I continued to watch this same paperclip for another two days before it was discovered by the staff. What follows is a faithful account of events as they unfolded:

I have spotted a second paperclip (where are these coming from anyway?) lying on the floor in the space between my room and the fluorescent-lit hallway outside, the space on which is painted a blue stripe to represent "the line that must not be crossed." In the middle of this line lies my shiny new friend. The stakes have been raised, and it is on. An armed guard sits squarely outside my open door, facing me. Should he turn his eyes downward just a wee bit, he would see IT: the deadliest of all weapons -- the Paperclip. I feel as though we are playing a kind of game, this guard and I. I imagine that he sees the paperclip just as I do, but that he is waiting for me to surreptitiously pick it up just as I am waiting for him. Sometimes we make eye contact, this guard and I. Surely he sees the paperclip! He must! IT'S RIGHT THERE!!!

By way of introducing a risk factor and thus heightening the intensity of the game, I crawl down from my bed, legs trembling from lack of exercise, nourishment, prolonged anxiety, and medication (I've been informed that I have Post Traumatic Stress Disorder and so must be medicated for that too), and traverse the three feet to the doorway where I inform my adversary of my intention to visit the bathroom. The guard stands, and I straighten my spine in mock dignity. I step right over the paperclip, right over that blue dividing line that exists for the specific purpose of reminding me (as if I could possibly forget) that I must not leave my room without permission and an escort. The guard follows me down the chaotically bustling hall to the tiny closet containing a filthy toilet and a box of moist towelettes in their foil-lined wrappers (and yes, this is a state-of-the-art, critically acclaimed hospital). When I open the bathroom door to leave, the guard is right there. I smile, and thank him for waiting. He is more good-natured than the rest; some of the guards barely reply when they are spoken to, and appear constantly annoyed, as though the request to use the bathroom were some ridiculous demand, on par with requesting a masseuse and a bottle of champagne. I am emboldened by the fact that, still, no one has yet seemed to notice my striped stockings beneath my feeble gown (why do they call it a "gown"? Is it sarcasm? Is there humor here after all?). The other patients aren't allowed socks of any kind, so I am living on the edge! Prancing back to my room, I see that the guard remains one step behind me. He sits down in his chair as I again cross the blue threshold, noting as I do so just how easy it would be for me to sweep the paperclip into the room with my toes, send it spinning to the corner and out of my warden's immediate view, then quickly pick it up on my way back into bed. What would I do with it there? I would most likely hold it for a while, silently exalting in my secret. You might think this childish, but inside these walls, where every inch of one's body is



known to the guards and nurses and god knows who else who rifle through my things before they are listed on a carbon copy chart and taken away, a secret paperclip seems to belong to one more than does one's own self. After pressing it between my fingers for a while, I would put the paperclip in my mouth, just to see if it would fit in case I ever needed a hiding place. Upon finding that, while it would fit (it's only a paperclip after all), it wouldn't be terribly comfortable for long-term storage, I would conclude that the mouth, while interesting, should be reserved for emergency transport only. Knowing full well that the hands and mouth had been mere foreplay to the actual destination, I would not be surprised when I slipped the paperclip down my gray and black stripes that maintained the singular honor of being noticed by no one. In retrospect, I can think of two reasons why I would have been allowed to keep them, the first being that the doctors must have assumed that my garb had already been inspected and approved by one of the other doctors, and the second reason being that, as one couldn't quite see how tall they were beneath the fabric, faded from numberless washings, that hung just below my knees, one might assume that they were knee socks only, and, thus, wouldn't think long enough on the subject to find a reason to take them away and put them into the plastic drawstring bag along with my other absconded belongings. In reality, the stockings come right up to the tops of my thighs, and, should I have wished to waste a perfectly lovely pair, I suppose I could have employed them for the purpose of aiding my strangulation quite as much as any thread or shoelace they have taken away from me, which is to say, not very much at all. Yes, under my left stocking (because left is further out of the guard's view), pressed against my thigh, I would feel just the tiniest kiss of cold metal and I would thrill inwardly, delighting in the delicious naughtiness of what I had done, a deed no less exhilarating than a cat burglar pulling off the heist of the century, black gloves dripping with diamonds...

Back in my bed, facing the doorway and all that lay in it, I congratulate myself on letting the game continue, for not being greedy, and for being, in fact, quite grown up about the whole thing. But, what's this! My monitor, my playmate, is rising from his chair. With his left foot, he sweeps the paperclip toward him where he finally picks it up. I am, naturally, disappointed that the guard found my paperclip, and that he felt it necessitated being taken away. For all of our eye contact and nods at each other, me from the dark of my cell, he from the garish glow of his hallway, there was never any actual trust being built, and, somehow, I had known that. So, when he swept his bulky toes across my blue-striped doorway and left the stripe clean behind him, I was not surprised, though I did wish I would have taken the paperclip while I could. I saw it first.

How inevitable that the disappearance of the second paperclip should bring me back to the first one still lying on the floor to my right with even greater zeal and passionate interest. I peer down at it, each glance meaning infinitely more since I have become aware that my one true friendship, the paperclip's and mine, is now in grave danger. What to do? I have already lost one by waiting... As this next lay more toward the middle of the room and directly within the guard's view, it would be far less simple to pick up, even were I feeling brave. So, with a heavy heart, I have come to the conclusion that I must not attempt to physically attain the paperclip. Yes, what joy there is to be derived from the paperclip must now be derived from no one else's finding the paperclip, and, when and if one does find the paperclip, who will it be?

The end, I hate to inform you, was exceedingly dull. The same guard waited until I was engaged in the extremely occasional phone call that patients are allowed to make on the hospital portable if we ask a staffer nicely enough. He then slunk into my room, nary a word. I wonder where he puts them...maybe in his stocking.

Once off the phone (just one more conversation in which I describe the conditions here and the boy on the other end doesn't seem to take any of it very seriously), I look down to my old familiar right side, at the spot once occupied by my perfectly healthy hide in, anything...he had so, so many talents. But alas, my two paperclips...they are both gone, and there are no more friends and no more games -- only the nub of my now taken to writing between the text, over the text, as though what I have to say is more important than what has already been deemed publishable, and I ask myself: Am I really this egotistical, or am I just burning to tell my story? And, hey, maybe that's how you write a book -- by writing over somebody else's.

## IF YOU WERE A CRAZY CHASER, WHERE WOULD YOU WORK?

### Hospital Entry 6: DOWNSTAIRS, UPSTAIRS

UPON RECEIVING THE GLAD TIDINGS THAT A BED IN THE PSYCH WARD UPSTAIRS IS BEING PREPARED FOR ME:

So! It has been announced that I am to be taken upstairs within the hour, though there is one wee complication: I will be going, nay, not to the ward for mere suicidal depressives and drug addicts, but to the other ward, the one reserved for honest-to-god lunatics. One of the nurses had popped in to deliver the happy news, reminding me that I would finally receive proper, intensive, specialized treatment (I think the words "Aren't you excited?" were actually inserted here), and could look forward to getting some real help rather than just lying in one place and drawing pictures of leeches in crayon. Next, in walked Dr. S, who told me not to be afraid (which automatically means that I ought to be), and that the order had been put in for my speedy transfer from Ward B to the less intimidating, more "appropriate," Ward A. Next, the good doctor came to my bedside (or, rather, my cage as I have come to consider it) and handed me a book. Perplexed, I asked him what it was, and he answered me in a tone of what I perceived as studied nonchalance (as in, "This old thing? Oh, just something I had lying around...").

Um, this is just a book that I've been told is really useful, and it's something I thought you might enjoy. I've had some of my other patients read it and they say it's helped them, so I thought you should have it next."

I accepted the book from Dr. S's outstretched hand, and, as I touched the smooth cover, I saw that it was new...it had never been opened, let alone passed around amongst a bunch of other lunatics before being bequeathed to me. Something was off. He seemed not to know what to say next, but continued talking as an alternative to making his overdue exit.

Dr. S must have noticed my hesitation, because he suddenly added, "Or, maybe it's silly, you know, one of those books that tries to teach you a new way to look at life, or whatever. But, uh, yes, just...have a look when you run out of space in all those books you've been writing in, or don't, if you want, you know, just...thought I'd give it to you." He wanted me to be writing in HIS book, and to be thinking of him each time I did. I know this.

"Thank you," I said quietly, "I'm sure it will be very helpful."

I didn't want to talk about it; I didn't want him to tell me any of the other wonderful things he had heard about the fucking book -- I didn't care. I just wanted this man to leave my room. I was out of my mind. Every moment of every day that passed, I questioned everything, from reality to whether or not I was actually alive. Each day I was being administered a handful of new drugs as I was detoxing from old drugs, but one thing of which I felt certain was that gifts, mementos, tokens of any kind, no matter their nature, should not be exchanged between doctor and patient down here in the Emergency Ward or anywhere else within this building. No one had ever told me that; they didn't need to.

An hour later and Dr. Sharpe is back. I am sitting up in my bed, waiting for the guards to come and get me, when in walks the doctor looking strangely smug. He steps up to the bedside and, without a word, hands me a folded sheet of paper. He hovers over me as I open it, and I see something more unexpected, more shocking, than anything I ever could have imagined. I see the lyrics to one of my own songs, "Marry Me." A true Vaudevillian, I generally live by the "never let 'em see you sweat" philosophy, and, as such, have a ready answer for everything, anytime, anywhere. Right now, I've got nothing.

"Aha," I manage. "This is my song..."



I fall silent. I have no idea how to respond to this. Dr. Sharpe figured out who I was. He tracked me down. He found my website. He dug through it extensively, which I know because the lyrics to this particular song are hidden within the site; they are not available to the casual visitor. My mind races, the rat in the maze, trying to figure how to get out of this incredibly uncomfortable situation. Dr. S is looking as though he had uncovered some marvelous secret and now ought to be rewarded.

"I really liked it," he says. "You're a great writer, and your voice is just...intoxicating. But I do have to ask you..."

And here, the doctor takes the paper from my trembling hands, and a red pen from his own pocket.

"Am I mistaken, or is this," he circles one of the lines, "a sexual metaphor?"

"Obviously," I say, trying desperately not to sound alarmed.

"I thought so," he says, self-satisfied. "And what about this line?"

"Yep, that too. Honestly though, Doctor, the entire song is a sexual metaphor. It's no secret. That's kind of the point."

"Wow...that's impressive, Emilie," he says. "You're very clever."

Traffic in the hallway is increasing and my wheelchair has arrived to take me away from this place -- I'm still not allowed to walk. Dr. S hurriedly thrusts the paper into my hands as though he is afraid to be seen with it, but I hand it back to him.

"I don't need it," I tell him. "It's my song."

"Oh, right, of course," he says, flustered.

Dr. S puts the paper in his pocket, its sexual metaphors circled in red ink for all to see. He goes to the door, then turns back to fix his eyes on me, collected once again.

"You know, Emilie, I've been thinking a lot about your case, and, well, there's something I'm pondering that I probably shouldn't be telling you, but it's up to you if you want to know it or not."

I tell him he may as well just say what he has to say since he's already set me up to wonder at it if he doesn't.

"Well, I was thinking that, maybe, along with being bipolar, you might also have something called 'borderline personality disorder.' It's a condition that stems back to your childhood, and would explain why you have these fragmented parts of yourself that don't quite fit together."

I ask Dr. S if that means I'm schizo just to see what he says, but here's the truth: I know exactly what BPD is, and I also know that I don't have it. A passing nurse tells me that it's time to go, and, as I crawl out of my Emergency Room gurney for the last time, Dr. S finally says what he has really come to say.

"So, I probably shouldn't have told you that, but, now that you know, if you'd like to learn more about it I do have a private practice, and I could possibly find some time for you, outside of this hospital."

Well. There it is then. Blatant manipulation. I know this game all too well. How many big shot record producers have insulted my work only to eagerly offer their own services in "fixing" it? It's the "you need me" game, and I figured it out years ago. Generally, when I see it now, it is only amusing, and a bit sad. But it's not amusing this time. This, the hospital, is supposed to be the one place that is safe for me -- free from the fear that awaits me on the streets outside, free from predators of all kinds. If I can't trust these people to help and to protect me, then there is no one left. And now, there is no one left. That old familiar self-loathing wells up inside for trusting this doctor enough to tell him a single thing about my brain and the person attached to it. I detest myself for ever believing he was here to help me. I hate that he is in control and I am the mental patient, and that, even were I willing to go through the process of reporting him and, inevitably, being called a liar and

watching what's left of my life being publicly ripped to shreds, Dr. Sharpe is the head psychiatrist; there is no one above him for me to go to, not while I'm in here anyway. And so I say "thank you," and he is gone.

All I care about, really, all I care about is that I have privacy, real privacy. If I do not, and I fear I will not (upon asking a passing nurse, I am told that I will likely be couched with one or perhaps five other crazies with no curtain

## MARRY ME

Marry me, he said  
Through his rotten teeth, bad breath, and  
then  
Marry me instead  
Of that strapping young goatherd, but  
when  
I was in his bed  
And my father had sold me  
I knew I hadn't any choice  
Hushed my voice  
Did what any girl would do and

between  
us),  
then I  
may  
actually  
flip out  
and then  
won't they  
be surprised  
-- the  
well-mannered  
mouse is  
causing  
trouble! There  
is a  
disturbance in  
the hallway;  
someone is  
screaming,  
bodies rush  
outside my door,  
please, god,  
don't let Dr.  
Sharpe come back  
before I am taken  
upstairs, please  
let the next person  
to pass my door be the  
guard with the  
wheelchair, please don't  
let me see him again,  
don't let him come to say  
goodbye...I am very, very  
anxious, my head is spinning  
and I am dizzy...heart racing,  
we're bordering on sheer terror  
here, ladies and gentlemen,  
oh god...

When I'm beheaded  
At least I was wedded  
And when I am buried  
At least I was married  
I'll hide my behavior  
With wine as my savior  
But oh, what beautiful things I'll wear  
What beautiful dresses and hair  
I'm lucky to share his bed  
Especially since I'll soon be dead

Marry me, he said  
God, he's ugly, but fortune is ours  
Running in the gardens  
Enjoying men, women, and flowers  
Then I break a glass  
And I slit my own innermost thigh  
So that I can pretend that I'm menstruating  
Well, unavailable

My life is arranged  
But this union's deranged  
So I'll fuck who I choose  
For we nothing to lose  
And when master's displeased  
I'll be down on my knees again

Oh, what beautiful things I'll wear  
What beautiful dresses and hair  
I'm lucky to share his bed  
Especially since I'll soon be dead

When dining on peacock  
I know I won't swallow  
Through balls, births, and bridge games  
I know what will follow  
We're coupled together  
Through hell, hurt, and hunger  
Or at least until husband  
Finds someone younger  
Yes, fertilization is part of my station  
I laugh as he drabs me in anticipation  
Of sons who will run things when I'm  
under covers  
But whose children are they? Why, mine  
and my lover's!

But, oh, what beautiful things I'll wear  
What beautiful dresses and hair  
I'm lucky to share his bed  
Especially since I'll soon be dead  
What beautiful things I'll wear  
What beautiful dresses and hair  
I'm lucky to share his bed  
Especially since I'll soon be dead



## Hospital Entry 7: THE PEN

HOLY FUCK WE'RE GOING UPSTAIRS!!!

After having been delayed several times, I was wheeled all the way up to crazytown, and I am here at last. The journey was beyond ridiculous; I would gladly have walked on my own two stocking feet, but that, apparently, is illegal ("Elope, not allowed to walk," said the guard, pushing me roughly back down into the chair). After an extremely lengthy trip through the building marked by stops and starts and elevators, I was at last rolled past the double doors, heavy black iron and painted with these welcoming words: PSYCH WARD. Yes, they actually do call it that. Once within, the nurses and surrounding guards seemed to expect me to simply hop on out of the wheelchair as though I had been here before and knew exactly when the trip ends and where to go next. I felt ashamed to tell them that it was my first time.

Immediately inside of the Psych Ward is a very curious structure: A single booth stands in the center of the Ward like a watchtower, encased entirely in glass windows that appear to be bulletproof. Within this unique brand of office loiter nurses and other staff members, engaged in their coffee-drenched gossip, and looking extremely at ease with the fact that they are on the inside of this chamber that clearly exists for their sole protection. I note that there is no such structure built for the protection of the inmates in what, I am truly astonished to find, is a shared male/female ward.

I am led by a morbidly obese "counselor" (is this summer camp?) to a small, dingy room that is introduced to me as the Dining Room, though it doesn't look like a place where anyone ought to be dining. The decor consists of a few round tables clustered together, cheap plastic wood and cheaper plastic chairs, a broken piano (why even bother?), and an opening in the wall that, once a metal curtain is rolled upwards, looks directly into the Ward Kitchen. On the wall below the opening is a metal shelf where we are to pick up our trays and bring them back again. I cannot imagine ever eating in this room, and not because of the horrors that surely emerge from that opening, or because the room itself is hideous and devoid of windows, but because the first thing I learn is that we are all to dine together, at the same time, three times a day plus "snacks" (again, are we five?). Sitting around in circles, some of us silent, some of us screaming, throwing, or hitting, this is where we will persuade our bodies to ingest sustenance if only because staff who monitor our trays are recording what we eat and what we leave behind, and leaving food behind can lead to very serious consequences.

It seems this is the room with the most privacy at the moment, so the counselor and I take our orange plastic seats opposite one another, and I am ready for my inquisition. I will try, I tell myself, to make it quicker this time; I've had enough practice by now to know that telling the whole story never helps, and only confuses the brilliant minds that are in charge of the health of mine.

It doesn't matter. Even my edited version appears to have a few too many twists and turns for the counselor. She glazes over, and I force myself to stop talking. After she's so way off it's almost funny, and proves that she either wasn't listening at all, or she knows I'm crazy and so it doesn't matter what the problem is just so long as I am here under lock and key of the state. I'm trying to be charming enough to convince her that I don't really need to be here (although I know that, in reality, I'm still more of a danger to myself than any of the lunatics already locked up here could possibly be), but I see that my attempts at wit are taken as obtuse and inappropriate behavior -- it's written all over her podgy face, as well as the forms she's filling out on my behalf. I make a joke about a serious situation and she marks me down for another day. I can't believe my luck to have found such a sensitive and

really rose to the occasion.

I am shown to a large room at the end of a long hall and behind two more industrial iron doors that look as though they ought to open out to some back alley where a dumpster awaits housing hungry rodents, but nay, this room is to be my sleeping quarters, so called because the only thing I am to be allowed to do in this room is sleep. There is to be no privacy, no quiet time, no nothing. We will all be sent here at a specific hour not chosen by us to recline into our drug-induced slumber. When we are awakened in the early morning by the sound of the alarm that is piped into every room at once and followed by the static-obscured voice of the nurse on duty announcing that it is time to get up, we are to say farewell to this room, farewell to my hoped for privacy, until we return, drugged, the following night.

There are five other beds in my room, and I realize that I had it pretty good down in the Emergency Ward, in the midst of madness as I was. Sure, I had a room next to a woman coming off crack and purposely using her hospital bed as a restroom just to anger the guards, but at least I had my own room. So maybe I had to leave the door wide open, and maybe there were two male security guards (who, I was constantly reminded, were there for my own protection) posted on either side night and day, but at least I didn't live in fear that, once I fell asleep, another inmate would approach my bed to strangle me or stab me with a plastic spoon. Downstairs, I only had to worry about Dr. Sharpe.

My sleeping quarters are yellow and as ugly as you can possibly imagine a room being. It is indeed a prison room, with bars on the small, high windows and all. I must truly be a horrible, dangerous, psychotic person that should never be allowed contact with civilized society, for I have actually succeeded in getting myself thrown into prison. And it is a prison. It looks like a prison, it smells like a prison, and it all makes sense: I literally committed a crime, and I am here to be punished.

For the fifth time since my introduction into the hospital, a nurse comes to look through my belongings (I was sent upstairs with all of my things piled on my lap, returned to me for the ride only, to be inspected and thieved anew upon my arrival in the Psych Ward) and takes most of them away with her again, still demanding control over my clothes, shoes, and toiletry case, the latter because it has within it a tiny mirror that I doubt I would be able to either remove or break even if I tried. Either way, I wouldn't be here if I wasn't crazy, so my words mean nothing to these people. But, what's this?

Oh good bloody sweet lord in heaven!  
Look at this! What does it look like?? It's a PEN!  
A fucking, don't-kill-yerself-with-it PEN!

♥PEN♥

♥PEN♥

♥PEN♥

SEE HOW SMALL I CAN WRITE?

LET'S SEE A CRAYON DO THAT!

SORRY, CRAYONS, YOU WERE GOOD TO ME AND I CAN NEVER REPAY YOU SAVE TO SPREAD THE GLORY OF YOUR NAME ACROSS THE GLOBE AND EVERY DARK CORNER OF THE UNIVERSE... BUT, I MEAN, SERIOUSLY...

I THINK WE ALL KNOW WHAT'S UP...

ANYWAY, THE PEN SIGNIFIES THAT I HAVE BEEN LIFTED FROM THE ER AND AM NOW THE PROUD OWNER OF A BED IN THE PSYCH WARD 'A WARD' BUT

ALSO OF A ♥PEN♥ (FUNNY HOW NOW THAT IN THE CRAZY HOUSE I'M ALLOWED TO HAVE A ---, RIGHT??)

I am finally left alone to arrange my remaining "things." There still isn't much I am allowed to keep; I can have a pen now but not my spiral notebook, and so I'm told that, should I feel the need to write, I must go to the glass booth and ask for a few sheets of paper at a time. I'm considering stabbing myself in the neck with my beloved pen just to get revenge.



## Hospital Entry 8: FAMILIARITY BREEDS CONTEMPT

Isn't it odd that "misery loves company," and yet "familiarity breeds contempt?" If there is any truth in the latter maxim, then it implies that we are all innately contemptible -- shielded from immediate discovery by a flimsy veil of mystery. I have never felt contempt for the girls I've known, but I have grown to feel it for nearly every man excepting perhaps three, and the clock is always ticking. Perhaps, then, men are innately contemptible, or perhaps I judge them too harshly and they are merely fools who make me sick.

My captors having given me a moment alone that I might acquaint myself with my latest address, I intend to savor it, but am given scarcely a breath in which to enjoy my pen and my privacy when into the bedroom walks Dr. Sharpe. He's come to see that I got upstairs all right. How could I get upstairs not all right? I was in a wheelchair being chauffeured by a security guard of sizeable proportions. What could possibly go wrong? I would like to think that Dr. Sharpe performs this bedside service for every patient he sends to Maximum Security, which is what it's called up here. My intruder picks up one of the books I've stacked neatly on my new bed, and leafs through the pages -- the ones I've filled with red wax. Has he come to see that I've kept his book amongst my own?

"I'm on to you," he says, too coy for his age. "You're here to do research. You're writing a book."

I can't tell if he's joking or not, but I am offended in any case. I have crawled through the very depths of hell; I have suffered through so much that it had become unbearable, and, finally, I attempted to take my own life. Now, I endure the judgment and the stigma that follows and will continue to follow me for the rest of my days upon this earth. For anyone to even suggest, as a joke or otherwise, that I committed myself to a mental hospital needlessly, and, worst of all, for the sake of "research," is unfathomable. For a doctor, a psychiatrist whose job it is to get me through this mess alive, it is simply criminal.

A nurse arrives to inform me that I will be meeting with a counselor before dinner tonight, and Dr. S makes his prompt departure, confirming my suspicion that he is not supposed to be here.

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It seems that every important decision I have made in my life has been made in order to combat some difficulty, almost in defense. I played music in my head to conquer the voices that plagued me nightly. I began singing in order to cure my throat of an internal injury.

So, how will I get myself out of this?

CROSS MY HEART  
AND  
HOPE YOU DIE



## Hospital Entry 9: DINNERTIME

My mind is full. My poor brain cannot process everything that has happened in the past week, to say nothing of the past day. I am overwhelmed. I can do nothing but stare at the coat that, due to the chill in the building, I have been allowed to keep, even though it is positively held together by safety pins (not very appropriately named it seems). The nurse must really be slacking off today. Maybe I should stab her with a safety pin. There is a knock on the metal doors. My second visitor is a rotund, middle-aged gentleman called Chris. He is clad in a slovenly arranged flowered (that's right, as in Hawaiian print) shirt and a decidedly "I'm the cool one you can talk to -- I'm not like your parents" air.

Chris sits down on the bed across from me and gives me the rundown of "how things go around here" before he, too, asks me why I have been hospitalized. I try to think of some way I can spice it up -- some way to get through the story quicker, for the good of all involved. He doesn't want the truth, and I don't want to tell it. Let's shake hands, and we're done. The fucking end. But not for my new friend; no, he really wants to get to the heart of the matter, to be the one who really, truly changes me. I think perhaps he is sincere, and I appreciate this, but he is also woefully underqualified for the task of dissecting a mind such as mine, or anyone's really -- I'm nobody special.

"How long have you been suffering from depression?"

"Since I was born."

"OK. How frequently have you had suicidal thoughts after your first depressive episode?"

"Every day."

I explain to Chris that my will to survive is obviously faulty in some way because, even on the good days, there is always at least one fleeting and almost imperceptible moment when a little voice in the back of my head whispers to me, "why are you doing this?" Then, on the bad days (or months as it may be), there is no coming up for air, and the little voice turns into a raging scream (much like the voices in my head when I was a child, but I don't think it would be wise to mention this to my bumbling warden). The voice never lets up unless I drug myself to sleep, and is always awake again and at my bedside to greet me first thing in the morning with all the ardor of a doting lover but none of the sore lips.

As I am explaining this little pro-suicide voice inside my head, my new best friend interrupts me with a syrupy, "because you didn't think you were good enough?"

"No, that isn't it at all," I counter, trying to remain patient. "That's what is so wrong about it -- I do think I'm good enough. I have a healthy ego. I know my worth. I think I'm plenty good enough, and I still have a pinhole of death in the balloon of my every day life, every fucking day."

I know that was a bad metaphor but I don't think it matters. Chris looks both perplexed and disappointed that he had been wrong in what he had clearly hoped, poor thing, would be a massive breakthrough for me. Maybe I'd start crying; we'd hug as he assured me that I really, truly was good enough, that I did deserve to be loved, and then I would thank him for saving my life. I feel guilty for taking this away from him, and make myself the solemn promise not to use any more metaphors in the mad house. After Chris makes his long awaited exit, it is time for all of the inmates to assemble for dinner. We creep from every corner of the building, some of us looking as though we are walking to our deaths, others looking too far-gone to know the

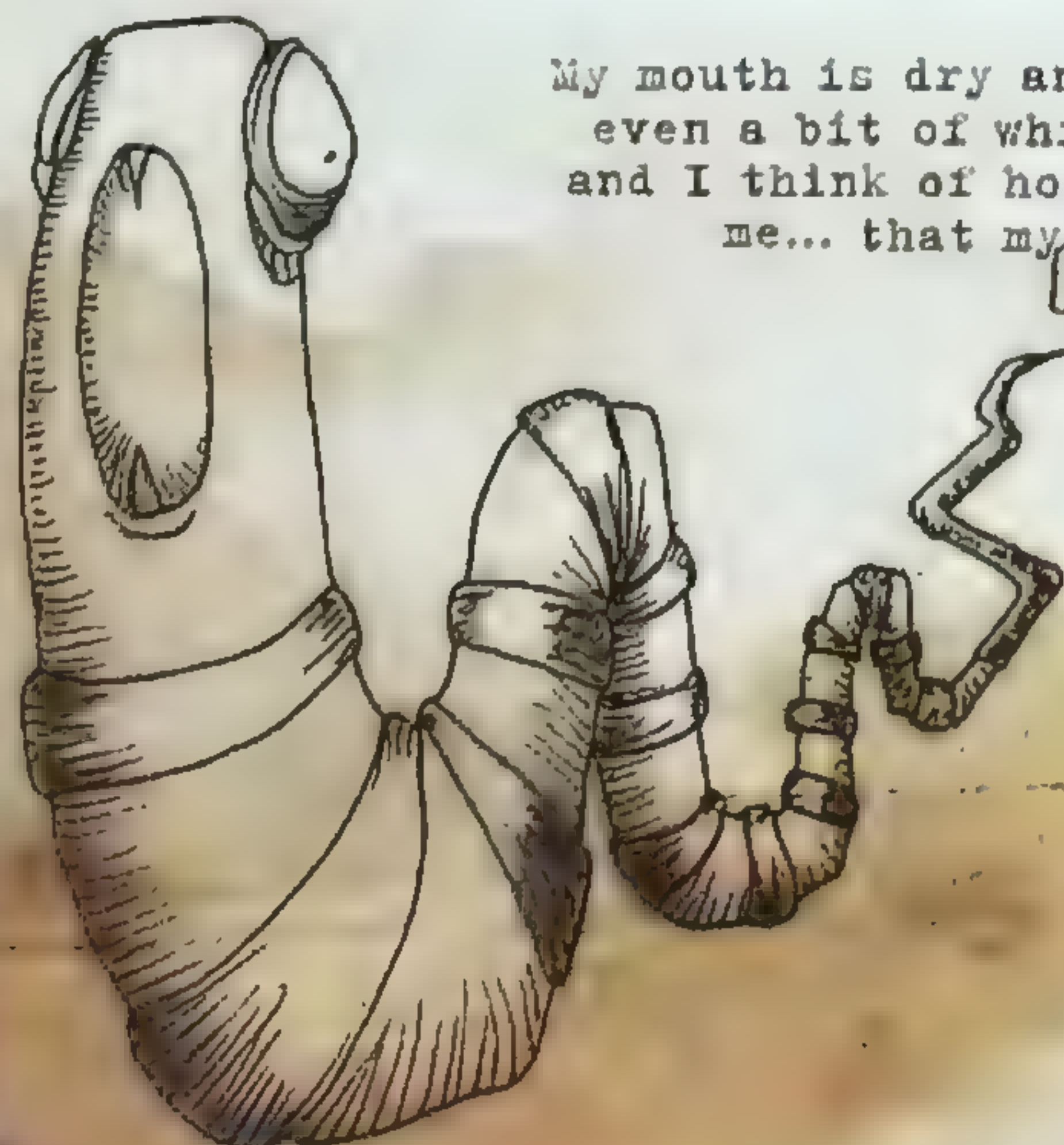


difference. Sitting down at one of the tables in the Dining Room, I observe the procedure: Wait quietly at the table of your choice (and choose wisely, or else...) until the grizzled cafeteria mistress calls your name, then go to the hole in the wall and pick up your tray. What am I doing here? I am humiliated -- a shred of a person. I am looked at just like everybody else in the Maximum Security Psych Ward; I am no different; I am not extraordinary. The staff had received no memo telling them that I am only here because there wasn't room anywhere else; as far as they are concerned, I am a violent lunatic, and, as such, deserve to be in this prison -- society's revenge upon the unhappy. I've gone into a sort of shock, trying not to look around me at the people of all ages, genders, shapes, sizes, and smells, most very odd looking, and some rather frightening. I can't believe I'm here, in the midst of the maddest scene I have ever witnessed; this is surreal; my head is spinning, and I feel dizzy... I am shaken from my stupor by a behemoth man approaching my table, the only other diner at which being an older lady called Violet who mutters to herself constantly, and seems ever on the verge of exploding. This assessment in no way prepares me for what happens next: I am marveling at this hulk of a man and at the substantial hump on his back, all the while wondering how on earth the hospital's administrators could justify having insane men in the same room as insane women, on principal alone. As I am preoccupied in calculations of just how easy it would be for him to snap my neck without even meaning to, the man reaches the table and begins to lower his tray. Suddenly, Violet begins to scream at him. She starts off quietly but with all the intensity of an erupting volcano. This escalates until she is shrieking wildly.

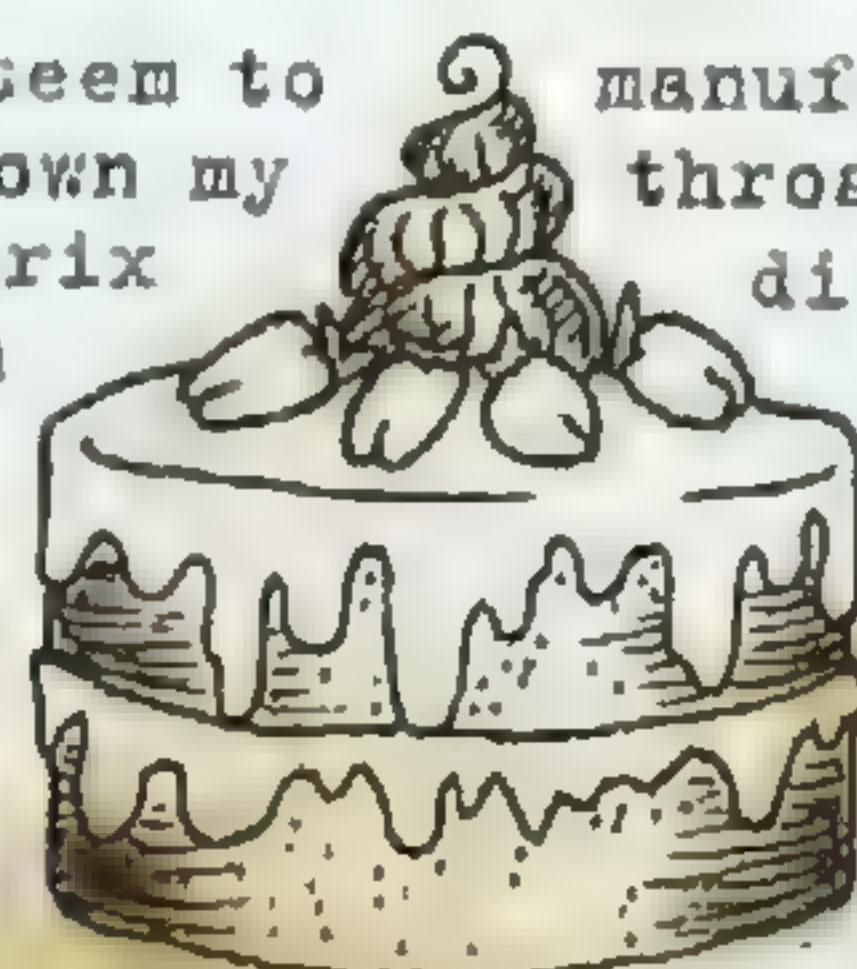
"How dare you sit down without asking! Get away, get away, GET AWAY!!!!!!"

Bingo. Here sits a woman who has obviously been sexually traumatized, a fact that was confirmed to me only moments into our acquaintance when, in her signature muttering, she introduced herself to me, adding to the end of her name, "Platonic. That means no sex." I assured her that she was safe with me. But the wardens? Not so much. They clearly hadn't diagnosed her as having profound issues with males being in her physical space because, if they had, then they, in good conscience, could not possibly have placed her in an environment where she would be surrounded by males who could be considered threatening by anyone's standards, let alone those of a victim of clearly some sort of abuse. Either that or the staff just doesn't care, which is even worse. With a grunt, the giant backs away, and Violet stops screaming. No one on duty comes to find out what went wrong. In fact, the other inmates barely raise their heads, and it seems as though the incident had been noticed by no one but myself. As though nothing had happened, Violet resumes her dinner, which consists primarily of a paper plate overflowing with canned corn kernels. I still haven't been called up to retrieve my tray of god knows what, and, looking around at the menagerie of fascinating creatures devouring their scraps, I appear to be the only one left. I hope that I can simply avoid the whole dining process; I can't possibly have an appetite in a place like this at the end of a day like the one I've just had.

Just as I think I've escaped unnoticed, the cafeteria lady mispronounces my name and slams a bright orange tray down on the metal shelf for me to take, which, against my will, I do. On said tray is a soggy paper plate piled with microwaved spaghetti to be eaten with -- get this -- a plastic spoon. Have you ever tried eating spaghetti with a plastic spoon? If you weren't crazy before, you will be after that.



My mouth is dry and I can't seem to even a bit of white bread down my throat; it's sticking in my mouth, and I think of how Jimi Hendrix died. I know they are watching me... that my evaluation has already begun.



My throat still burns  
from the hydrogen peroxide.

## Hospital Entry 10: THE FIRST NOTE

It is morning. After my first night in the real live Psych Ward, I have new details to recount: I sleep in a room where I am awakened in the night by the sound of my fellow inmates sneaking about, fiddling with electrical outlets, crawling around on the empty beds as I pull my blanket up to my eyes, staring out into the blackness, barely able to make out the shapes of the night crawlers so that I can jump out of my brick hard, plastic covered bed and start running if they come near my corner. But where could I go? The staff locks the doors from the outside during the night. I suppose that, snug in their bulletproof sanctuary, they don't want to be bothered by the creepers, so they leave us locked up to fend for ourselves. They can then take an extended coffee and cigarette break, knowing that we're not going anywhere, and that they can't hear us scream behind our solid barricade. Ignorance is bliss.

The first thing we are ordered to do upon rising is to assemble in the Day Room. There, we will line up to be weighed and given our first round of pills. I wonder how the nurses are absolutely certain to give us the correct medications and not mix them up with someone else's. Scanning the room, we all look so sedated and lost -- it probably wouldn't have mattered what we took just so long as it kept us quiet for a few more hours, until the next dose.

And then, there is breakfast. I have managed to get through the first breakfast with my motley new companions with little to report and even less eaten. I don't feel hunger anymore, which is a great favor to my stomach, because, had I wished to sample any of the gray eggs and soggy toast on my paper plate, the sites and sounds around me would have rendered this an impossibility.

Breakfast over, we are left to our own devices; mine require pen and paper, so I leave the Day Room and walk across the hall to the glass chamber where the staff is busying themselves for the morning shift. I lean my head against the glass and, speaking through a small opening made for just this purpose (like the ones in banks or movie theatres), I ask one of the nurses if she would let me have my notebook. The nurse emerges from her sanctuary and leads me down the hall to a locked closet. As she turns the key, she tells me that I will be allowed the use of my notebook during the day if I promise to return it at night, and not to let it out of my site during the hours I have it with me; she explains that this is because of the spiral wire that binds the notebook together. Rolling my eyes (not advisable, by the way), I assure her that I do not intend to kill myself with my own notebook, but her concern is not for me; if one of the other inmates were to get hold of it in the night, what then? I think to propose that this problem could be easily solved by the separation of my sleeping quarters from those who made a habit of digging into other people's things, but decide against it -- there is no suggestion box in the Psych Ward. The closet door open, the nurse reaches into the dark and pulls a string. A single bulb dimly illuminates three walls lined with small wooden compartments. I see my shoes with the skulls peeking out from a compartment on the upper left of the back wall, and reach into it. As I pull out my long lusted after notebook, a slip of paper falls from between the pages; I bend to pick it up. Folded in quarters, the paper seems a bit weathered -- wrinkled, and nearly transparent; I can see writing through the backside of the sheet, but I don't recognize the note, and am about to open it when the nurse, who has been standing over me and scrutinizing my every move, coughs audibly -- an obvious demonstration of impatience. I slide the paper back between the pages of my notebook, and both the nurse and I exit the closet.

Several hours have passed and I have been watched constantly. Activities are enforced here, as are meals, leaving me without a moment to study the note. I assume it must be something of my own that I've forgotten, but I can't think what, which I suppose is the very essence of "forgotten," isn't it... My stomach flutters nervously, but I don't know why. Finally, I am able to sneak away from group exercise (this is where we



are all lined up and herded around the barbed wire enclosed patio area on the roof of the hospital), and find a nurse to let me into the bathroom, which is kept locked. I know I don't have much time. Shutting myself inside a stall (no locks for us), I unfold the note. Written in a hasty flourish, this is what I find:

Everyone can taste sugar. But do you know all of the elements that make up sugar, and the flavour of each element alone? And what if you could? Would this ability, ~no, not ability~ necessity, inescapable necessity its dissonant that which is sugar make your experience of sugar any more pleasurable? Or would it distract you to the point of no longer tasting sugar at all, but instead the acids and other less than savoury elements simultaneously, each flavour, and each flavour within each flavour, vying for dominance until you are gagging, choking, gasping for air... until sugar is no longer sugar but something awful and confusing and impossibly complex, infecting your tongue and your body and finally your brain and all you want is water.

But what is in the water? What is it made of and where did it come from and why does it hurt?

What depths of horror... black, revolting, deadly horror might one experience were one's basic ingredients not sugar, but, perhaps, ash... or metal shavings... or blood? Ophelia drowned, they say... drowned herself, herself drowned, drowned in senses, drowned in sounds, drowned in voices, unhappy and unheard...

We are machines, all of us...

And what does a machine do when too much is assigned to it? When too much code, too much ink, too much information is forced violently through its channels?

Why, it stutters, it chokes, and, finally, it shuts down.

Where do they put the broken machines? There is only one place.

From the Asylum for Wayward Victorian Girls,

Emily (with a 'y')

The alarm is ringing for dinner, and I know it will soon be time to return my notebook. Folding the note, I tuck it into the top of my right stocking, and walk down the hall toward the Dining Room. I'm late.

## Hospital Entry 11: THE FORGOTTEN FLOOR

We've all heard the phrase "the lunatics are running the asylum."

The funny thing is, they do.

Since my first night in the Maximum Security Psych Ward, I have witnessed more violence than I have in all my time traversing downtown Los Angeles. First, there was the rapist in training, a clumsy, muscular kid of about sixteen who generally walked about stuttering and repeating himself while downing container after container of yoghurt, but, when denied a phone call, erupted in a torrent of shrieks. After attacking the nurses who tried to quiet him, he had to be pinned to the ground by two security guards, then sedated and locked away in Solitary, a.k.a. the Quiet Room. By dinnertime, the kid was back, walking around, babbling, and eating yoghurt as though nothing had ever happened.

Then, there was the schizophrenic (we are all thrown together here regardless of our disparate conditions) who decided it might be jolly good fun to go racing toward the staff enclosure wielding an acoustic guitar and, screaming all the while, smashing said guitar into the glass with all the strength his overly developed body possessed, resulting in an explosion of splinters and snapping steel strings. A new inmate had arrived, a woman called Lucy, who, like me, did not belong in A West. Lucy happened to be walking by the glass as the brute was in the act of racing toward it. Lucy's head was exactly six inches away (I measured) from the spot of impact at the very moment the guitar hit; a slight change in the wind and she would have been dead on the spot. Of course, since she was still alive, and since the bulletproof glass had done its duty in protecting the staff on the other side, there was nothing to worry about. And when the shattered wood was cleared and the offender dragged to the Quiet Room (which looks, just in case you are curious, exactly like they do in the movies: iron door, padded cell, tiny letterbox window, heavy lock, soundproof, so on), Lucy and I and everyone else were shooed away from the scene and sent to our rooms until the fantastically competent staff was calm enough themselves to deal with us. No one ever spoke to Lucy or any of the rest of us regarding the incident. No one asked her if she was all right, when, in fact, she was so shaken by her brush with obliteration that she became physically ill and stayed that way. No one apologized for putting us all in danger as a result of their extremely poor judgment in letting the dangerous coexist with the sad, or with anybody for that matter. And no one, no one ever explained how it was that I wasn't allowed a pencil but this violent rucking lunatic was allowed a guitar in the first place. It's quite all right though: History written in pencil is easily erased -- crayons are forever.

If you have been privy to a violent childhood, then you know the terrorizing effect that being anywhere in the vicinity of a loud and aggressive male (or many loud and aggressive males) has on your mental stability, and, if you haven't, then lucky you. Suffice it to say that, after a week in Maximum Security Psych Ward A West, I am more depressed, more suicidal, more emaciated, and more ill in every way than I have ever been. I never stop shaking, not even in my sleep. And it hasn't even begun yet.

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I have heard the mental hospital described as a place where the distressed person can go to have a "rest."

There is no "rest."

Every moment is spent looking over my shoulder, attempting to protect myself both mentally and physically. Should I have to do this? Perhaps not, but I have realized something rather ironic about life here in the Maximum Security Psych Ward: There is



no security. The "Maximum Security" part refers to the type of patient that belongs here, i.e. the level of "crazy" we're dealing with; it has nothing whatever to do with how safe we are. There are no actual guards here on a day-to-day basis; they are called in only during emergency situations. Down in the Emergency Ward, I had been guarded constantly, and, as maddening as that had been, it had its benefits; just as I couldn't simply walk out of my room, nobody else could simply walk in (except, of course, the staff, which was not entirely comforting either, but I digress). Yet, now that I am here in the actual insane asylum and not merely the purgatory that must be endured beforehand, nobody cares what is done to us or what we do to each other, just so long as we are in the correct room at the correct time, we eat what we're given, we walk around the caged patio when we're told, and we line up and take our pills three times a day with all the docility of a beaten dog. I am not at all certain what is supposed to happen up here. I, for one, have received no treatment of any kind. I am completely forgotten unless Counselor Chris is asking for my advice on how to deal with his rebellious teenage daughter. But I am not the only one who is forgotten here. I have come to know the conditions and histories of the inmates rather well as there is nothing to do here but observe and to write down my observations whenever I am sure that there is not some violent inmate or nosy nurse behind me waiting to steal my notes. Paranoid? Damn right.

One of my first observations upon arrival several days ago had been the following: The majority of these patients will never be going home. In many cases, they had been dumped here to be forgotten after becoming a burden to their families, an insane asylum being a less complicated and far less expensive retirement home. In other cases, the wretches are simply too dangerous, too senseless, or too sad, though whether they were such when they arrived here or have only become so since is something that I will never know. Of course, these observations are of the greatest concern to me personally...is it only a matter of time before I forget how to use a spoon as well? Is it my relative sanity that makes my life here so painful, so desperate, so hopeless? Loosen my grip on that, and perhaps life both in the asylum and out becomes much easier...

And why am I still here? My seventy-two hours were up days ago. I've been told that I am to wait for something, though what that means exactly I do not know. Treatment, I suppose, someone to come and "counsel" me, to teach me some life techniques I can use to try and be happier. But still I walk around, vacantly, silently, counting the minutes, hoping someone will notice my good behavior and let me go. I even make a desperate attempt to appear cheerful, interacting with the other inmates as they accost me because of my hair color or because of my simply being in the room (we are not allowed to be alone, remember?), and having the occasional conversation with those few who are awake enough to carry one out, the subject matter of these most often being the state of the food, who is in for what, or whether or not anyone has mints (a common form of currency within the asylum). Perhaps the staff is waiting for me to look non-suicidal. Perhaps they are waiting for me to gain weight. Perhaps they are actually waiting for me to start acting crazy, because surely I couldn't recover until I could admit that I was nuts in the first place, which, incidentally, I do -- I just don't act it out in the manner that the staff expects me to. Or perhaps they just forgot about me. And, if I ask questions, one of the wardens will speak to me very slowly as though I were not only a child but also a mentally disabled one, which, I suppose, is exactly what I am.

It is fascinating to me that a suicide attempt, by default, legally lands you, by your will or against it, into the asylum, the psych ward, the loony bin, the nut house, call it what you will, it's all the same. Perhaps you are crazy, perhaps you are not, but I do not believe that, IN ITSELF ALONE, attempting suicide proves anything at all about your mental state, save that, upon weighing the merits of living and dying, you found that one outweighed the other. Is this crazy? I see nothing insane about it at all. Socially unacceptable, to be sure, but not mad.

The funny thing about mental hospitals is that they strip away any remaining reason you have to live, but deny you the means to do anything about it. If you're truly suicidal, you will make it your singular goal to get out of there. If you really want it, and if you're clever enough, there WILL come a day when you finally convince the staff that you are so dazlingly well that they really ought to let you go, if only so that they can then congratulate themselves on a job well done -- another one cured.

And the letter, you ask? It wasn't the last. I have since received close on a dozen more. For the first few days, I walked about in a state of incredulous wonder, looking over my shoulders, not knowing whether someone was playing a trick on me, if I was

truly and finally going mad, or both. Either way, since then, I have come to depend on the Asylum letters as not only much needed diversion from the monotony of hospital life, but also as my only form of communication from the outside, even if it wasn't the outside from which I had been torn (which probably made it even better).

I no longer care where the letters come from, or if they are even real, just so long as I continue to hear from Emily (with a "y"). And, as luck (or madness) would have it, I have found a new letter tucked between the pages of my notebook when I go to reclaim it from the closet every morning. Sometimes they are notes of only a few sentences, sometimes a page long, sometimes more, but they are always the reason I wake up each day. And, of course, I am hardly content with possessing my letters for the day only to give them up at night, certainly not, for the letters are the only things that truly belong to me. I have developed a system by which I retrieve my notebook in the mornings, flip through the pages with pounding heart until I find the hoped for missive, and then, after reading it through several times during the day, shut myself inside a bathroom stall and stow the day's Asylum letter in my right stocking before giving back my notebook in the evenings before bed. The truth is that I cannot bear to be without something from Emily's antique world at all times; I do not know who she is or to whom she writes, or if she is only writing to keep herself from going mad just as I am, but these letters exert an almost physical pull on me, demanding to be read and re-read, and, by sleeping with the day's note in my stocking and then tucking it back in my notebook the following morning when I tear through the pages in search of the next installment from the Asylum for Wayward Victorian Girls, I am never alone.

*Dearest Children,*

*It is at this moment that I feel I should explain the letters that follow.*

*I have, myself, made copies of each letter from the Asylum F.W.V. Girls that Emilie received during this period, and will insert them into this volume at the points where they belong, in the event that Emilie does not, or cannot, speak of them herself.*

*Faithfully,*

*Sir Edward*



Asylum Letter No. II

(The following is continued from a letter begun illegibly. -- S.E.)

...and when I looked out, I saw that we were heading fast upon a series of iron gates set in stone, wickedly arched, and crowned with tall spikes of erratically varying height. But what unnerved me completely lay beyond the gates: a pair of wooden doors -- massive, pointed peak towering over us even from afar. Bar-crossed and studded with heavy bolts, the doors were set in a great stone wall that appeared to be protecting whatever waited inside. So paralyzed was I by the sight before me that I did not notice we had already driven past the first of the three spiked gates guarding access onward and we were at the second gate. I turned to look back and saw the barricades we simply through years of habit, more accustomed were they to being closed than open. A quiver began in my toes and ascended through my frame, vibrating the marrow in every bone until it reached the back of my neck and froze there. Were these gates erected for the protection of this great establishment? For the security of these admirable inhabitants in? With each turn of the wheels that brought me closer to the final gate, I tried vainly to drown out the answer to my question with whatever music I could conjure into my head.

As we approached, I began to lose my grasp on reality. I imagined we were moving in circles, driving through the same gate over and over again, endlessly spinning, as to this unknown world was granted to us. I remembered the lock on the cabinet in my Music Master's study -- the one with four lettered plates that must be rotated a definite amount and then aligned in a perfect, secret order before it would open -- a new device, they said, and completely secure. I had once unlocked it by sheer chance, and I remembered the scolding I received afterwards. I feverishly repeated the opening strains of Queen Victoria's current favorite (and mine too), Felix Mendelssohn's Violin Concerto in E minor (a particularly poor choice considering the melancholy nature of the piece), but was unable to make the passage stick. A sharp tug on the other end of the leather strap attached to my choking collar pulled me back into the world that existed outside of my head.

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I was born to Irish parents in the part of London where only the poorest of the paupers make their homes. Having known no other way of living, I was far from unhappy; I had learned to cook and sew, and spent most of my waking hours watching over my younger brothers and sisters. Sometimes I believe I have remembrances of my older sister, but I am not certain, for I was only an infant when she died, and my too vivid imagination is a dreadful influence upon my memory. In any event, my parents never spoke of her, and, for fear of upsetting them, neither did I.

In our damp and drafty dwelling, I was glad to perform any menial task I was assigned as I wanted more than all else to feel useful; my sense of self-worth as a child was derived directly from this sense of usefulness, as I suppose it is even now (I have recently learned that the original meaning of the name "EMILY" is, in fact, "industrious," but then, what's in a name?). Late at night, I would entertain myself by picking out notes on my grandfather's old and weather-beaten violin, which was hung, together with its sadly warped and nearly hairless bow, on the peeling wall in the room I shared with my sisters. My father had succumbed to the drink, a common tragedy in these parts where opium and alcohol were the only escapes from the overcrowding and immense poverty, and he usually stayed out into the morning, which was quite satisfactory to us all. Being in the possession of a memory for music, and able to reproduce most melodies upon first

hearing, I would teach myself to play the tunes I heard in the streets -- mostly folk songs from the lands of our ancestors: Ireland, of course, but also Scotland, and even some from India, for we were all immigrants here. Sometimes, my father would let me follow him to the tavern where, standing on a table, I would play to the drunken delight of the raucous men and their painted ladies. The more boisterous of the company would sing along to the jolly, drinking songs, whilst the older men would weep silently as I played the slow and mournful ballads of the homelands they would never see again. I truly loved standing on that table, commanding the attention I would never receive at home amongst the noise and squalor, and so, much as I disliked my father, I played the doting daughter for the occasional privilege of performing.

One night, as the snow piled up against the frosted panes, a man in a tall grey hat and immaculate dress walked into the tavern as I was engaged in playing one of those haunting ballads of old. I quit my song as he selected a corner to stand in; the company stared at the intruder, all except for my father who was quite in his cups. The stranger requested, in a language more proper than any I had yet heard, that I continue, and so I did, afraid to disobey. The man stood silent and still until the end, but he did not applaud as the others did, and I felt I must have played very poorly to the refined ear of such a grand gentleman. Having grown weary, I left my post; wrapping my violin in its bit of red cloth, I held it tightly to my chest as I went to sit upon my little stool behind the bar. The man with the tall grey hat walked towards me, and, suddenly, despite the fire and the heat of crowded bodies, I felt cold.

"Who amongst this company is your father, my girl?" he asked, looking at me intently.

"Him sitting with that lady in the corner, Sir."

He nodded to me, then moved towards the table I had pointed to. Approaching my father, the stranger spoke to him in low tones; I could not make out his words. For a moment, I thought that my father seemed to recognize the man, but I must have been wrong for they did not shake hands. A few more words were exchanged, and my father nodded his head; the man turned and left the tavern with a flourish of his long grey coat.

As we walked home that night, my father did not speak to me, but then he usually did not; I cannot say why it seemed strange at this time more than any other, and yet, it did. Later, as I lay in bed with my sisters, I heard my father speaking to my mother on the other side of the paper-thin wall. My stomach tightened; their nocturnal fighting was a common enough occurrence, but I had never hardened my nerves to it, much as I had tried. Unable to shut out the noise, I listened as I always did. Tonight was different -- there were no raised voices; they spoke in hushed tones, and I could only divine bits of their conversation.

"He has promised a sum such as we could live on for a year or more," said my father.

"Not if you drink it away this time, we couldn't. But be that what it is, there are too many of us. Tell him...tell him we accept," said my mother.

The next morning, the man with the tall grey hat knocked at our door. Through my window, I had seen him trudging through the filthy snow, and was overcome yet again with that peculiar chill I had felt as he had approached me the night before. I hid in my room, but, upon hearing the jingle of coins, I knew everything. My mother came to find me and told me to follow; she did not look into my eyes. I took my beloved instrument from its nail and wrapped it in the red cloth; I knew, as much as I have ever known anything, that I would not have the opportunity to come back for it.

"You have made a very wise decision," said the man to my parents. "She will be well cared for, and will receive the very finest education in music, and in all things befitting a young lady."

As my mother left the room, my father gave a low and clumsy bow, something I had never seen him do. The man in the tall grey hat took me away, and nobody said goodbye. I was five years old.

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Upon arriving at the Unfortunate Girl's Musical Conservatoire, I was given my first proper dress and a new violin; though it did not have the soul of my grandfather's, it was a very fine instrument indeed, and must have been quite expensive. The man who had



taken me from my family turned out to be the Headmaster of the Conservatoire, but he was only an occasional presence there; most of his time was spent traveling and recruiting new pupils. When he was at the school, he entertained his guests (always well-groomed gentlemen), and guided them on tours of the facilities, hosting recitals where we would play for the strangers he invited. He also made visits during our lessons, when he would critique everything from our playing to our posture to the way our hair was dressed, which resulted in our being fastidiously concerned with our manners and appearances. During the years that followed, I was educated alongside close on one hundred girls of varying age, all seemingly orphans or castaways like myself, and I came to know a great deal about a great many things, but mostly about music. Though none of us girls were terribly fond of the restrictive nature of life within the Conservatoire, this consisting of strict curfews, proper behavior at all times, not being allowed to leave the school grounds, and long hours of solitary education and a mastery of our chosen instruments that most men on the world's stages could hardly compare with. We were very privileged girls, or so we were frequently told, for, though the studies were grueling and left time for little else, very, very hard, we would grow up to become celebrated musicians, performing on grand stages in golden theatres and crystal palaces for kings and queens. It was this dream Masters when we played out of tune, the austere coldness of the Headmaster and Mistress, and the complete absence of both love and life outside, for which we were starved.

There were joys, however. Each afternoon at four o'clock, we would pause our practice and assemble in the Drawing Room for tea. While we were modestly brought up, and strictly trained to watch our figures so that we could compress our developing waists into painfully harsh and mercilessly boned corsets (we were made even to sleep in these wretched devices, can you imagine?), our cook was a kindly old woman who delighted us with crumpets, scones and cakes whenever she could manage it.

And then there was the tea, a drink such as I had never known before coming to the Conservatoire. My near-forgotten mother had often brewed something by the same name, but it was pale and flavourless in comparison. The foreign distilment I now enjoyed was dark, rich, and tasted of all things elegant and civilized; there was no greater pleasure for me than pouring my drop of milk into a delicate china



cup so thin as to be nearly transparent, then infusing the liquid with steaming amber and watching the two disparate elements blend into the dusky brown that soothed the lonely soul and calmed the shattered nerves following a particularly trying lesson with the Music Master.

Most of my fellow pupils were pleasant enough, though a few were rather awful I'm afraid, always playing tricks on the younger and weaker girls, and gossiping their free hours away for lack of anything better to do. Nearly all of us had come from poor immigrant families who badly needed the money that was offered them in exchange for their girls. There was one such creature in particular who quickly became my companion in all things, and this was Sachiko. Sachiko was from the Orient, though she did not know exactly wherein as she had been taken from her family at such a young age that she could not remember, and, for reasons unknown to us, the Conservatoire staff took great pains to conceal from us any details of our histories prior to our admission. Since her arrival, Sachiko had been shunned by the crueler girls who made fun of her exotic eyes, her unfamiliar accent, and anything else about her that was not like them, all of these things being, oddly enough, the traits I found so lovely. Sachiko bore it all with quiet dignity, though, truth be told, together we devised many a trick of our own to pay them back with, for there was no more mischievous spirit in the Conservatoire than my Asian friend.

Sachiko was always up for sneaking about at night, thieving bits of cake left out in the Drawing Room and dragging me along on secret excursions to the attic where the portraits were kept; we would go there as often as we dared, and there we would look through the albums filled with painted miniatures of hundreds, possibly even thousands of girls. We assumed that these were former pupils of the Conservatoire who had completed their studies and gone on to grace the stages of the world, and we spent hours pouring through these books, sighing over the beautiful gowns pictured, the exquisitely arranged hair, and imagining the glamorous lives these ladies must now be leading, all the while dreaming of the day when we could join them. Much to our mutual delight, Sachiko and I were assigned the same sleeping quarters in my fifth year at the Conservatoire. Sachiko was a cellist, and late at night, when we had talked our voices dry, she would produce the bits of cake and lumps of sugar that she had managed to pilfer throughout the day, and we would play Mozart duets as quietly as we could until the sun came up. Our incessant giggling often got us into trouble, alerting the Headmistress to our being quite awake when we ought not to be, and, though we were invariably tired in the mornings, I would never have changed a moment of it. Alone, we were timid and nervous girls, but, together, we blossomed.

Every few weeks, one or two of the students would disappear, and we were informed that they had been deemed ready to make their debuts on the stages of London, Paris, and beyond. We envied these girls and yet we were naturally fearful of the unknown. We also dreaded the inevitable separation from our schoolmates.

One bleak February night as the bare branches scratched at our chamber windows, Sachiko coerced me up to the attic to sample the small bottle of sherry she had stolen from her Music Master's study as he was retrieving a volume of Bach Sonatas from the Library. We were quivering with all the excitement of that which is forbidden, and I admitted to having a bit of doubt about the sherry -- I had never tasted it, you see. Still, I knew better than to attempt to

Sachiko



Violoncello



disguade Sachiko. We crept from our beds and scurried on tiptoe down the hall, past the Headmistress's room where a sliver of light from within indicated that she had not yet retired, and up the steep and narrow staircase leading to the attic. Once settled and over the usual giggling fit, Sachiko opened the sherry and bravely swigged it straight from the bottle, squinting her eyes a bit. Impressed, I took the bottle she offered and sipped it myself; a bout of coughing ensued, but another sip of the liquor seemed to be the remedy. A few swills later and we were again leafing through the portraits, comparing the girls' charms, and I dare say being a bit louder about it than we should. We noticed a new volume and found within it many fresh subjects with which to amuse ourselves. Meanwhile, our sherry was quickly disappearing, for we had decided between us that it really didn't taste so awfully after all. Turning over the pages, we began to recognize some of the faces as belonging to girls we had known well, and who had only recently left the Conservatoire. It was strange to see them dressed so richly and displaying their bare shoulders and arms, but we supposed that all of the great ladies of London must dress in such a fashion, and we imagined the adventures they must be having at that very moment. Reaching the final page, we were struck silent: the very last portrait was of Sachiko. There was no mistaking it -- her name was even printed above the picture. Though she was dressed in clothes she had never worn, and posed on a settee she had never seen, the likeness was perfect. Looking back upon that sobering instant, I suppose we might have been excited at the indication that Sachiko would be leaving the school to pursue the dream we all shared, but, in that moment, there was no excitement. We looked at each other, neither of us knowing what to say, nor even what to think; I could not be happy for her, and I did not know why; it seemed she could not be happy for herself either. I quietly closed the book and put it back where I had found it. Leaving behind the remnants of the sherry, we descended the stairs and found our way back to our room without a word between us. Sachiko crawled into her bed, forgetting to blow out the candle. I blew it out myself, then got into the bed beside her. We both wept that night; contrary to all logic, we had somehow assumed that we would be leaving the Conservatoire at the same time.

*Sachiko*

*English Translation: Child of Happiness*

*May she find it*

*and I as well*

And so it came -- the following day, a foggy Sunday in the February of my sixteenth year: the worst day of my life. Sachiko and I had risen and dressed cheerfully enough that morning, neither of us mentioning what had taken place the night before. It was as though we shared an understanding that, if we did not speak of it, it might just go away. Sachiko was not called into her lessons that morning, but sat alone in the Drawing Room. I had my studies as usual, but could not concentrate on my scales, and so my Music Master gave up and sent me away to practice on my own. And then, just before tea, Sachiko was escorted into the Headmaster's study and I knew in my heart what was coming. I waited outside the study door for her to emerge and, when she did, her face was streaming with tears and she could not speak. She fell into my arms and I did my best to comfort her, trying hard to convince her that she had received a great honour, that I would practice twice as hard so that I could follow her, and

that, soon, we would be the darlings of Europe, performing our Mozart duets for royalty. As she packed her little trunk the following dawn, I made Sachiko promise to write to me at the very first opportunity to tell me that she was all right. Of course, I also wanted desperately to know what lay ahead for me when it was my turn. My efforts to lift her spirits had succeeded sufficiently for her to show at last a bit of excitement at her impending journey, and her enthusiasm made my heart lighter as well. By the time the coach arrived, we had managed to convince each other that this was, in fact, a wonderful day, and that it was to mark the first real change in our lives -- from the isolated and monotonous to the glamorous and thrilling. I would follow her shortly, of course...it was just a matter of time. The footman came for her trunk, and my dearest friend was called outside and away from me. We kissed each other goodbye, and she was gone.

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The empty bed in my room was quickly filled by another girl; I knew it was wrong of me, but I resented her sleeping in Sachiko's bed and putting her things in Sachiko's cabinet, and so I made no attempt to befriend her. Instead, I directed all of my attention towards my studies, and, to the delight of my Music Master, worked more diligently than ever, practicing tedious arpeggios, etudes, and countless concertos until my fingers were raw. Weeks dragged by, then months, and I still had not heard from Sachiko. At last, one morning, a letter came for me. I knew that the Headmistress read all of our letters before they were given to us (not that there was much to read, but occasionally a girl's family would contact her to see that she was all right -- my own family had never done this in the twelve years I had been at the Conservatoire), so I had taken up the habit of loitering near the front door at the post's usual hour, and, thus, I was there to snatch my letter directly from the postman's hands, scampering off before he had time to protest. There was no return address on the envelope, but I knew whom it was from. Back in my room, I tore open the envelope and unfolded the letter. My heart stopped. Scrawled in a reddish smear were only two words: **RUN AWAY**.

At that very moment, the Headmistress, whom I had not heard enter my room, snatched the letter from my trembling hands; I was taken roughly by the arm and pulled down the hall towards the Headmaster's study. The Headmaster himself was waiting there, his tall grey hat set atop a table in the corner. I assumed I had been dragged before him to be punished for opening my own letter, but neither the letter nor my naughtiness were ever mentioned. Instead, I was informed that I would be taken that very afternoon to a house in the city where I would stay as I prepared for my debut. Ought I to have been happy? Perhaps. But I wasn't; Sachiko's ominous note had thrown my mind into a sea of panic, and I was drowning fast. The only thing of which I was certain was that something was dreadfully wrong. I was dismissed, and returned to my room to find my trunk already packed, my two violins in their cases beside it. A coach pulled up to the drive, and I was seen off by the Headmistress who instructed me to behave myself and do all that my generous host asked of me, placing especial emphasis on the word "all." My schoolmates stood in the doorway and waved their hands as the horses started up and drove me away. Although Sachiko had been my closest companion, I had made a good many friends during my time in the Unfortunate Girl's Musical Conservatoire. Some of the girls even shed tears, and, for that, I loved them more than ever.

**RUN AWAY**

佐知子



Inside the coach, I was met by a man with the wrinkled face of a prune and almost as much charm. He was in butler's dress, and I hoped that his dour exterior was no indication of the sort of household I would be visiting. He passed his drooping eyes over me, but spoke not a word. Desperate for clues to my future, I summoned the courage to ask him where we were headed.

"You are being brought to London...to Bainbridge, the house of your new master," answered the old man, his vacant face turned to the window.

I felt a pang of anxiety, but steadied myself.

"Master? I don't understand you, Sir. Why should I have a master?"

The old man would not look at me, and turned his eyes down to peruse a bundle of papers he held in his lap. He did not answer me either, but I was never one to give up so easily.

"Begging your pardon, Sir, for I can see your papers absorb you entirely at the moment, but I must trouble you with my question once more. I have departed from the Conservatoire to begin my career as a performing musician. I am no longer a pupil and thus should have no master. Is this not correct?"

Again, my escort made no reply, and we exchanged no more words until we reached London three hours later, and the willow-lined drive that was my introduction to Bainbridge.

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The house was a sprawling structure set atop a cliff directly above the bank of what I would later learn was the river Thames. Ornate, even garish, this vulgar display of wealth was decorated lavishly in the Baroque style. I knew that the term "Baroque" these marble columns, curling ornaments, and gilded angels was beyond me. With some calmed slightly by the appearance of a young, auburn-haired housemaid who met us at foyer, violin case in either hand; overwhelmed, I stood still in the surprisingly without a farewell. The butler had already taken his leave of me, not

"Come on, then, Miss," she said.

As I followed her up a flight of stairs and down a long corridor with high, painted ceilings and several doors on either side, I noticed that she had what looked like burn marks on her neck -- long red stripes where the skin was peeling. She opened a door on the left and led me into a richly furnished chamber, the centerpiece of which was a magnificent canopied bed hung with gold-embroidered gauze. On the walls were several large paintings of a most peculiar sort; each depicted men, women, and even children in various states of undress, and engaging in sundry acts as I had not only never seen, but could not possibly have imagined without straining my mind to the point of snapping. I did not like to look at them, and, as indicated by her downcast eyes, neither did the maid.

"I'm to tell you to please stay in your room, Miss. You may unpack your things if you like, but you're not to come out."

She curtsied quickly and turned to leave, but I called her back. I could not bear to be alone in such a strange place, for, as opulent as it was, it had no warmth, and that same foreboding that I had felt upon reading Sachiko's letter began to rise within me.

"Please, couldn't you stay for just a little while?"

"I'm afraid I can't, Miss, or the Master will be upset."

Again, there was that word.

"The Master? But how would he know?"

"He knows everything."

Her parting words frightened me more than a little, and for a long time I sat on the edge of the bed, not knowing what else to do, and too afraid to inspect my surroundings. At last, my native curiosity revived itself and I rose to walk about the room, leafing through books, picking up trinkets then setting them down again, trying to find some object that would hint at what sort of place I had come to. My eyes swept across the paintings hung high upon the walls. The painting on the wall directly facing the bed featured a demonic looking satyr in the act of tearing the clothing from a naked young girl. Suddenly, I cried out in surprise. The satyr's eyes had been replaced by holes in the canvas, and through one of these holes stared a glittering blue eye. Upon my involuntary outburst, the eye disappeared, but it was all too much; I curled up behind the bed curtains and shook from head to toe until I lost consciousness from sheer exhaustion.

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I could not say how many hours had passed, but when the housemaid came to rouse me, it was dark out.

"Miss," she said softly, "I'm very sorry to wake you, but I am to tell you that the Master will see you tonight. I will help you to prepare yourself."

The maid opened the wardrobe, revealing several gowns in rich colors and fine fabrics. She selected a cream silk with lace and ribbons adorning the short, puffed sleeves; after handing me a pair of freshly pressed undergarments and tightening my corset, she helped me into the dress. It was a beautiful gown, but I felt constricted despite the shoulder baring style which I had never worn before. It occurred to me that I had not been measured for any new dresses, but, as this one fit me precisely, I supposed that one of my own had been sent to be copied in advance. My assistant worked quietly, often pausing as though she were listening for something. I could stand the silence no longer.

"What is your name?"

"Anne, Miss."

"Mine is Emily. With a 'y,' you know."

"I know, Miss."

She looked a bit older than I, and spoke in an accent more cultivated than I thought usual for a housemaid.

"Have you been in this household long?"

"Some years, Miss."

"And where did you live before you came to this house?"

Anne did not answer.

"Anne?"

"I lived where you lived, Miss."

"Really? In the Conservatoire, you mean?"

"Yes, in the Conservatoire. I had been a pupil there as a child, before your time, I'm quite sure."

"How queer! And what was your instrument there?"

"Violin, Miss -- the Master has an especial preference for violinists, you see -- but I don't play anymore."

"Whyever not? Oh, Anne! You must play one of mine! I wouldn't mind a bit. In fact, I insist upon it."

In my enthusiasm, I had turned my body, wresting the laces of the stirrily boned bodice from Anne's fingers. She gathered them again and pulled them tight, giving me a jolt.



"I am a maid now, Miss. I aspire to nothing more."

"But how did you come to be such? Did you not leave the Conservatoire for the stage, as I have?"

"I suppose that, in a way, I did. But I failed." She paused. "You will not fail as I failed -- I've heard about you. The Master's been asking for you for quite a long time now, and, had there not been others asking as well, I dare say you would have come sooner."

"Others? Anne, I really don't see..."

My throat had gone dry as if in protest of the questions I wished to ask. I needed water.

"Anne," I lowered my tone, "Anne, I must ask you a question, though I hardly know how, it is so strange. After you left me this afternoon, I was looking about and I saw something in that painting there...that awful one with the satyr..."

Anne dropped the pins she had been using to fasten tiny white flowers to my hair, which she had dressed very prettily indeed in long, loose curls. I had never been allowed to wear my hair loose before -- none of the girls were; the Headmistress had told us that it was a distraction, though from what and to whom she never said. I knelt down to help Anne, and, as we both gathered up the scattered pins, I asked her if anything was wrong.

"Miss Emily," Anne interrupted, rising suddenly, "we are terribly late and must go to the Music Room at once."

Her demeanor had altered completely; she spoke curtly and sounded nervous as she bade me fetch my violin. I chose my old and weather-beaten friend as I was unsettled and felt it would bring me strength. We walked briskly down the long corridor and into a wood-paneled room hung heavily with velvet curtains in the deepest scarlet I had ever seen. It was there that Anne left me.

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The Music Room was fairly large, with several intricately carved chairs placed in clusters around a marvelously crafted harpsichord, the lid of which was raised and painted inside with ladies in a pastoral scene. It is true that the pianoforte is more in the fashion these days, but many still prefer the percussive element of the older instrument. Entirely absorbed in the inspection of the lid, I was startled by footsteps close behind me. I spun around to find myself facing a tall, blond-haired man with only one eye. A grey velvet patch covered the spot where his left eye ought to have been; his right was a piercing, icy blue. My thoughts turned back to that afternoon -- back to the painting with the satyr...

"Greetings, my pet, and welcome to Bainbridge," said the man, with a ceremonious bow. "I am the Count de Rothsberg. I have been to the Conservatoire to watch you play many times."

His speech was coloured with something foreign...German -- I was sure of it. I thought it odd that he used the word "watch" instead of "hear," but then English was not his native language.

"I am pleased to see you grace my Music Room at last. Though you do look pale, I daresay the journey has not affected your health, and besides, I think I like you pale...you were not meant to be an "English Rose," as they call it here. But, you are not nervous, are you?"

I did not answer. The Count had raised his hand to my face, his long white fingers lifting my chin and turning my head slowly from side to side as though he meant to inspect me.

"I trust your fingers are nimble as ever?"

I managed a small nod.

"Your skill with the bow..." he said, "quite...what's the word...intoxicating."

His words were not unkind, and yet this was not the sort of speech I had been expecting, and it made my skin crawl; I did not like to be touched, and retreated a step. The Count smiled, exposing sharp, irregular teeth.

"You see, my pet, *ma petite fille, mein kleines Mädchen*, it has been my fondest wish that you should make Bainbridge your home, as well as mine. I have arranged that you shall have everything a young lady could desire, and all I ask in return is that you live here and play exclusively for me, and the occasional guest, of course."

"Live here?" I faltered, speaking for the first time. "I'm afraid I do not understand you, Sir." With growing courage, I went on. "I do thank you for your generous offer, Sir, but I do not intend to establish a permanent residence for a while yet, as I believe my professional obligations will restrict me to travel for quite some time."

The Count began to laugh, very quietly at first.

Confused, I continued, "I've been chosen...I have been trained, Sir, for..."

I could no longer think of what exactly I had been trained for.

"All those years of education and they really do teach you nothing...it's almost cruel, isn't it? Well, no matter, my pet. You shall soon experience the culmination of your studies. Come now, be a good girl and play us a bit of Bach...one of the slower Sonatas, perhaps? I'm sure you've done it before."

He said this last with a tone of sarcasm I did not understand the root of. Seating himself in the corner, the Count waited silently for me to begin. I knew instinctively that this was a man to be obeyed, and so, despite every desire to do otherwise, I lifted the violin to my chin and began to play. Several bars had passed and my wooden companion did indeed seem to stay my nerves, as I knew it would, as it always had. I escaped inside of the instrument, then inside of the notes I had grown up with; it was a warm place -- a sanctuary that I created and controlled.

A soft sigh from the Count's corner brought me back. Still playing, I glanced towards him; his one eye was closed and his body swayed slightly in his chair, causing the wooden legs to creak. Though he was partially obscured by the chairs around him, I could clearly see that his breeches had come undone... I suddenly felt that I might become ill, and my bow slipped from the strings. Opening his eye, the Count shouted at me to continue, his feigned courtesy having dissolved completely. So startled was I that my cherished instrument slipped from my hands and fell to the floor with a clatter, snapping off one of the delicate corners near the mid-section and cracking the body; the wounds may as well have been my own. The Count shouted again.

"Pick up your instrument and play, you stupid bitch!"

Stunned beyond all comprehension, I stood for a moment, staring at the Count in disbelief. Then, I turned and ran from the room, scalding tears of indignation, disgust, and, from a new, shadowy place that had been born within me that night, shame, streaming down my cheeks.

I ran back the way I had come, but was soon lost in the maze of corridors. The gas-lamps had not yet been lit, and so it was without warning that I ran directly into Anne as she hurried to light them, nearly sending us both toppling to the floor.

Raising her candle, Anne put a finger to her lips. She opened a narrow door in the corridor wall and pulled me in after her, quickly shutting it behind us. The flame dimly illuminated a closet just barely large enough for two diminutive girls. I tried to speak, but Anne clapped her hand over my mouth. She put her ear to the door, and I held my breath. Hearing nothing but the pounding of our own hearts, Anne set her candle on a small shelf and took my hands in hers. This one, miniscule act of kindness was too much for me; I flung myself into her arms.

"Oh, Miss," she had become gentle Anne again. "Please don't cry...if you cry, then I'll cry, and then what? We'll have drowned ourselves here in the closet...oh, shush now...try and breathe. You must listen to me, Emily."

She held my soiled face between her hands and steadied me with her green eyes so like my own.



"Where am I?" I whispered.

"You are in a far off place, somewhere calm and quiet, and you're sitting in a little boat as the sea carries you away from everything that isn't perfect. Or, rather, that is my place -- you will learn to find your own."

I covered my face with my hands.

"It will never again be as bad as the first night. I promise you this, Emily."

"How can you know that?"

"Believe me, Em...I know."

"I have to go back, Anne...when they hear what's happened, where I've been taken, what a grave mistake has been made...and you'll come too! I must write a letter! Yes, I'll write a letter, and someone will come...someone will come, they must!"

My frantic movements had caused the candle to go out, leaving us in complete darkness.

"Anne, Anne...oh, how do I leave this place?"

"You don't."

"What?"

Nothing was making any sense to me.

"No," said Anne quietly, "you don't leave. And neither do I. Now, keep quiet or we're both in for it."

At that moment, the door flew open and there stood the Count in his shirtsleeves, the sharp angles of his chiseled face lit from below by the candelabrum he carried, giving him a demonic cast.

"Rats in the cupboard again?" he sneered.

He extended the candelabrum into the closet until it actually singed a lock of Anne's hair, hissing like a cat as it did so.

"Rats, rats, clever little rats... How does one bring a rat out of her hole? Why, one must burn her out!"

Thrusting the flames into my face, the Count reached his other hand into the closet and grabbed hold of my arm, dragging me out with a force I was unable to fight. He set the candelabrum on a side table just outside the door, then held me fast while digging into his shirtfront, finally producing a golden key on a long chain.

"We shall keep this rat in her trap tonight," he said, before slamming the door shut and locking it with Anne inside.

I could hear Anne screaming and pounding on the door as the Count pulled me down the corridor and back to my chamber.

Once inside, the door was locked and the Count pulled me violently from the floor where I had fallen, only to send me back just as quickly with a sharp blow to my face. And this was but a prelude to what was to come.

When I opened my eyes the following morning, my body was bruised and broken, and I was lying in a mass of blood and torn fabric. I couldn't move; everything hurt, and breathing was no exception.

There was a faint knock at the door and Anne crept in, her own face blackened with bruises. She had wrapped a kerchief around her neck, but still I could see more of the same angry burn marks I had noticed as I first followed Anne to my room on the previous afternoon. She kept her head down as she carried in a pile of rags and a bucket of steaming, soapy water. She saw me lying on the floor, but said nothing. Working quickly, Anne helped me to my feet, then wrapped me in a clean white dressing gown and put me to bed. I could think of nothing to say; I lay still and watched her through swollen eyes as she made a valiant attempt to clean up the blood, scrubbing the stained wood with all the strength her slender arms could muster, but the floor was beyond repair. Stopping her work, Anne put down the rag and buried her face in her hands.

"Anne," I choked forth, reaching towards her.

Anne hesitated, then rose to sit beside me on the bed.

"What is happening?" I asked her.

She turned to me, meeting my eyes at last.

"What is happening is exactly what is supposed to happen. This is what happens to all of us when we leave the Conservatoire. There is no one to come for you, Emily, because it was they who sent you here. Everything you've grown up to believe...it was all a lie...a trick...there are no concerts, no stages, no freedom...it isn't real...it never was."

"No...that can't be true..." I whispered.

Anne took firm hold of my shoulders.

"Can't you see it? We've been sold, Em. That's what the Conservatoire is for. We've been bought from our families who were either too poor or too foolish to refuse, and then trained to please, in a great many ways, a particular...sort."

"What sort..." I began, but the words wouldn't come.

"Men with the means, and the perverse desire, to own a very unique species of circus monkey, with which to entertain themselves and their 'friends'."

I thought of the rigorous training, the physical inspections, things that had seemed so ordinary at the time... I thought of the many strange men who would often visit the school, standing quietly at the back of the salon when we would give our recitals... I thought of the day I had asked why I didn't have a surname, and of how I was told that it was because it didn't matter. From that day forward, the girls and I had taken to calling each other by some identifying element of our Christian names, simple as it may be, as a means of establishing at least the illusion of individuality and history within a system that constantly reminded us that we had neither; I was "Emily with a 'y'." And then, I thought of Sachiko. Now I understood what she had been trying to tell me. She could be dead by now, just as I could soon be. All of the pretty pictures I had forced into my mind over the years -- dreams I had depended on to get from one day to the next -- all had faded overnight, leaving only despair in their place.

"If I've been bought, then that would make me...a whore..." I said to myself, trying on the word to see how it fit.

Anne fell back on the bed beside me and turned her face to mine.

"At least you were expensive," she replied, and, contrary as it may seem, we couldn't help laughing.

We wrapped our bruised arms around each other, and Anne told me all she knew of the



world we now inhabited, a world it seemed I didn't know at all, and was utterly unprepared for. Living in close proximity to the girls who had come to Bainbridge before me, as well as being in the presence of the Count and his guests, all of whom liked to talk freely on the subject of their vices especially when pretty maids were about, Anne had learned that the Conservatoire was not the only institution of its kind, and far from it. There were several such establishments, often called "stables," throughout the country and beyond, catering to the varied tastes and preferences of the men who funded them. Musicians, dancers, painters, poets, girls who could speak Latin, girls who couldn't speak at all, girls with bound feet, girls with red hair, girls of sixteen, girls of six, with missing limbs, with extra limbs (there had reportedly been a girl born with four legs who was sold to a French doctor for a very good price), and sometimes there were even boys, boys who looked like girls, girls who looked like boys...any talent, any oddity a child could be naturally or artificially endowed with (for it was not uncommon for a child to be maimed in order to suit the fashion for limbless torsos; the child would then be sold as an "authentic," the new owner never being the wiser as the child's clever warden had taken care to have the poor thing's tongue surgically removed as well), and there was a man, or many men; with a fetish for just such a thing, and the means not only to buy it, but also to keep it quiet.

It had been years since Anne was brought to Bainbridge just as I had been, but she had disappointed both her new master and her old tutors by her excessive nervousness when asked to perform; her fingers would turn to ice, and ever note she had ever learned would flee her memory. Her inability to delight the Count and his clique rendered her worthless to him, despite her physical attributes, she possessed an angelic face punctuated by a light frost of freckles, eyes a changeable green, pale and graceful limbs, and a great expanse of auburn hair quite the same color as mine, though I did not suppose myself nearly so pretty. Our close resemblance had not eluded us, and we supposed that we must be of a particularly unfortunate "breed" that the Count was most fond of, although Anne had seen numerous young girls of varying looks and talents come and go during her years of service at Bainbridge. Sachiko had not been one of them.

Naturally, the Count had demanded back his payment for Anne, but had kept her anyway; he considered it too great a danger to let her out into the world knowing all that she had learned, and the Conservatoire was of quite the same mind. It seems the Count had required a new tailor maid, those he had previously employed never staying on very long, and so she was thrust into the role of enslaved domestic servant. She had watched closely for any opportunity to escape, but the Count, in his maniacal quest for unmitigated control over his hellish domain, had fitted every door and every window on his estate with double-sided locks that would open only by the turn of one Master Key, and this he always wore about his neck, even while he slept.

Once, Anne had seen her chance at freedom: When she had first arrived at Bainbridge, a pair of identical twin girls occupied one of the innumerable chambers. Painfully shy, they rarely spoke, and so their origins were a mystery, their nightly screaming being the only way Anne knew they had tongues at all. When Anne had been sold to the Count, it was expected that she would take on her share of the torture, but, when she failed to amuse, she became less of a target for the Count's passions and his furies, though she still suffered under his hand quite often just the same. Thus fueled by disappointment in his faulty purchase, the Count fell upon the twins doubly hard, and so it was no surprise when Anne, having come upstairs to the Dining Room early one morning to clear the shattered plates and glasses from the preceding night's revelry, found one of the sisters dead. What exactly had happened Anne was never entirely certain, but it had something to do with the girl having been stuck through her flesh with meat hooks and then strung up on ropes hung from the high, gilded ceiling in what was supposed to be a sort of puppet theater for one of the Count's debauches. Anne had heard this much from one of the serving maids who had been present at the time, but no one could quite explain how the poor child came to be hanging from her feet at a distance nearly six meters in the air, bruises all over her naked body, long gashes reaching from her childish hips to her chest, as though a pack of madmen had sought to slash the unripe womanhood right out of her.

At first, Anne had not seen the girl's body. She was busy clearing the wreckage when she heard a sound like dripping water -- slow, yet persistent. She moved about the room in search of the source, but could find nothing. Then, a drop of liquid fell onto her cheek. She touched her face, then looked at her fingertips. Red. Anne looked up to see the dead girl hanging directly above her. Blood had pooled below the pitiable wretch, and it was still dripping from the tips of her long black hair where the remainder had collected; Anne had not noticed the gory mess until she was standing in

the midst of it. Later that day, when the body was put into its beggar's box, Anne observed a large bald patch on the dead girl's skull where the hair had been cropped close. The lid closed at last, Anne watched from the peephole in the front door as the coffin was loaded into the undertaker's cart like nothing more than another day's trash. Feeling faint, Anne leaned against the door and felt it give way; it was then that she realized that the thing that never happened had finally happened: the Count had left the door to Bainbridge unlocked. If she were to move quickly, she could easily reach the cart before it was beyond the gates. But she never left the house.

I asked Anne why she didn't take her chance when she could, and she explained that she felt responsible for the girl's death (a sentiment I did not agree with), and, thus, owed her own life to the surviving sister who had not only fallen into a state of shock at the loss of her twin, but was also in even greater danger now that she was the only one left. As it turned out, Anne had little chance to console the girl; seven days passed, during which time the girl lay in her bed, refusing to eat, drink, or even to move, and, on the eighth, when Anne climbed the stairs once again to bring the girl the morning tea that would likely go untouched, she found the bed empty. Steeling herself for news of the inevitable, Anne went downstairs to the kitchen only to find the Count himself slumped over in a chair; a visiting doctor changed a soiled bandage on his face, which looked as though a piece had been cut out of it. The butler, the same who had been my escort to Bainbridge, was able to verify that one of the good carving knives had gone missing, but no one had seen anything, and, strangely, the Count made no explanation to any of the staff. Instead, he disappeared for a few days, and, when he returned, he was wearing the eye patch that he was, from that day forth, never seen without. For weeks after, there was gossip amongst the servants suggesting that it was the remaining sister who had wounded the Count, but Anne could not believe the girl capable of such an act; after all, she was a frail thing who barely spoke, hadn't moved or shown any sign of life in days, and was a quarter the Count's size; how could she possibly have managed it? It was too ridiculous. All suspicion aside, the girl was not seen again, and Anne, like the rest of the servants, believed her dead.

In the years since, Anne had seen girls come and go but had never again sought her escape, still carrying with her that awful guilt of mistaken responsibility, and, with it, the belief that she would only be redeemed by watching over her fellow prisoners, and aiding them in any small way she could. Anne knew that she would never survive in the world alone with no connections and no skill with which to make her way, and at least she was useful at Bainbridge.

Exhausted from talking, we had both fallen into a light slumber when Anne was roused by footsteps in the corridor outside; she shook me, and I saw that her eyes were wide with fear. The knob slowly turned and the door swung open revealing the Count. Anne leapt from the bed; she curtsied quickly before scurrying over to the mantelpiece where she began polishing the ornaments with the corner of her apron. The baby angels, the porcelain dolls, all lace and rosy cheeks...I was clearly not the first girl to have occupied what I now knew was a chamber of torture.

The Count did not speak, but walked towards the bed, an insidious sneer framing the pointed teeth I had become intimately acquainted with the night before. He wore his riding costume and smelled of the outdoors. Over his left eye was a new patch made of cream brocade and embroidered with tiny rosebuds; I had never seen such a strange device on a man, nor on a woman for that matter. The Count arranged himself on the edge of the bed; gingerly removing one of his gloves, he slid his long-nailed thumb between my lips, then down my neck to my chest. I oringed and turned away. He rose without a word and settled himself into an armchair facing the bed.

"Emily, my pet, I have come to congratulate you on a job well done. Your debut performance had a rough beginning, it's true, but it ended very well indeed. I am quite pleased with you, though I do advise you to learn to better control your nerves."

At this, the Count directed his gaze towards Anne, who stood with her back to him. A gaudy cherub she had been polishing fell to the ground, the glass shattering. I shut my eyes tight to trap the tears that rose inside. My Master continued.

"I am expecting a small party of friends this evening -- all gentlemen of the highest birth, you'll be honoured to know."

I could not have cared if the Count's guests were the King of England or a con -- I



took no honour in meeting them.

"I have lured them to Bainbridge with news of my new prodigy's arrival, and they are most desirous of seeing you play. I shall expect you delectably attired and prepared to amuse us after we dine."

I wished for death...I truly wished I could simply stop breathing and close my eyes forever. I knew I could not go through it all again, and now there would be more of them. To the astonishment of both the Count and myself, it was Anne who burst out in protest.

"Please, Sir," she begged, "could she not have a few days more to recover? She's not well, Sir...you'll kill her..."

The Count softly laughed and rose from his chair. Fearing that she had just gotten us both into a great deal of trouble, Anne knelt down upon the floor and began stammering apologies, and I was glad of it -- I did not think I could bear to see the Count strike her.

"Your concern for your new playmate is most touching, Anne. Now, raise yourself and come to me."

He spoke with a terrible calm far worse than shouting, and Anne obeyed with all the submission of one who had been trained to do just that. Slowly, deliberately, the Count untied his cravat, unfastened his collar, and with his right hand inside the leather glove he had earlier removed. Without moving his gaze from Anne, he reached out to the nightstand on his left, taking hold of the single candle that still burned there. I tried to raise myself; my eyes darted from the Count to Anne and then back again. From inside his shirt, the Count produced the long chain on which was strung the Master Key, the same he had used to lock Anne inside the closet the night before. He held the key to the flame, turning it over several times. As he did so, Anne mechanically tilted her head to one side, exposing her fragile neck already marked by scars and unhealed gashes. I, too, had become oddly transfixed by the Count's steady movements, by the dancing of the flame, and by the way the gold key gleamed ever brighter as it warmed. Finally, the Count lifted the key to Anne's neck and pressed it into her flesh, which hissed and popped beneath the metal, and it was in that very moment that I realized with complete clarity what Anne had been living with each and every day -- conditioned was she to her treatment that she came to it willingly; I saw myself in her place, and I knew that I would rather die than live such a life. Surely I could not be thought mad for choosing death, could I? Anne made no sound, but I saw her entire body shudder and her eyes shut tightly. I heard myself scream as I bounded out of bed and over to Anne, but, before I could reach her, the Count was punishing her with a second burn. He never spoke when he tormented -- he didn't need to -- it was his very silence that terrified, and I am sure he knew this. He hadn't spoken to me during the pain of the previous night, and I had realized even then that he wanted to hear the cries uninterrupted. Anne would not give him the pleasure, and this only extended the torture.

Insensible to my own pain, I thrust myself between Anne and the Count.

Step away from her," he commanded me.

"I will not," I said, with a calm that surprised even myself.

Hurling Anne aside, the Count advanced towards me, but all my fear had turned to rage when I had seen him hurt my friend.

"You murderer..." I growled, "you murderer...you coward...you sick, sick--"

Anne interrupted my sudden tirade; running at the Count from behind, she struck him in the back of the head with a heavy book of what turned out to be erotic "art." The Count stumbled forward; Anne and I raced towards the door, but her hand had only just reached the knob when the Count recovered his footing and lunged at us, spewing forth an animalistic roar. He had me by the arm, but I managed to claw at his face with my free hand, resulting in the tearing away of his eye patch. It truly was hideous -- a gaping hole surrounded by thick white scars that seemed to be alive, resembling writhing maggots. The Count recoiled and covered his ghastly visage, his vanity giving us just the moment we needed in which to open the chamber door. No time for congratulations, however, for the Count was fast upon us, raging incoherently.

Through the corridors we ran, flying down the grand staircase and finally reaching the foyer. Halfway down the steps that Anne and I had descended not a moment before, the Count paused to seize a heavy ironwork candlestick from a decorative table on the landing and launched it towards us, thick, dripping candles still alight. I was hit, a sharp edge slicing my shoulder open. Boiling wax went everywhere as the candlestick made impact, and some splattered onto my right cheek, burning me badly. Stunned, I stood still for a moment, my hand to my face, but when Anne shouted my name and tossed me an elaborately carved stone phallus, I was ready not only to catch it in one hand, but also to spin around and send it flying towards the Count. Success! I had hit him, and he tumbled down the stairs, lying motionless at the bottom, his forehead bleeding profusely. My wits recovered, I finally reached the door, but Anne had tripped over one of the Count's hunting hounds, a barking pack of which had come to join the fun.

"It's locked!" I shouted back at Anne, now certain of our imminent failure. Still on the ground, Anne struggled to her knees and crawled over to where the Count's body lay. She tore open his shirt, located the Master Key, and attempted to break the chain that secured it around his neck. The Count's eye fluttered open, and he groaned weakly. One last tug on the chain and the job was done. Anne slid the key across the marble floor towards me; stopping it with my foot, I snatched it up, turned it in the lock, then ran back to Anne. I took hold of her arm and pulled her through the door behind me just as the Count staggered to his feet.



The main entrance to Bainbridge faced the river, and, as the grounds were surrounded by tall gates on the three remaining sides, our only hope of escape was the bridge leading from the bank below to the crowded city of London on the other side of the Thames. Anne pointed to an obscured path leading down from the garden to the rocks below; from there we could climb the five meters to the dock, gaining entrance to the bridge. While the bridge was more easily accessible from the village on the other side of the house, that option was not available to us.

Stumbling down the steep crag, only the rocks that we must climb remained, and our bare feet were scored raw by the time we reached the dock. Frantic neighing sounded from the cliff of Bainbridge above us; we turned to see the black silhouette of a figure on horseback, menacing before the setting sun, the sky ablaze with its dying burst. We knew it was the Count; he had spotted us, and would be close behind within minutes if he took the village path.

"Don't look, just run!" shouted Anne.

Onwards we raced. The bridge was tall, rising in a steady arc; lamp posts marked the points where supporting columns plunged down into the water, creating a series of arches wide enough for the boats to pass through. The sun seemed to be sinking faster than nature could possibly allow, and I felt as though time were speeding along at twice its usual pace; the darkness devoured us. The bridge was much longer than it had looked from the cliff above, but still we ran. We had nearly reached the median, and would soon be able to see our destination: the city on the other side. Hooves pounded the stones behind us, and the barking of the hunting hounds grew ever louder. The Count had boarded the bridge, and he was not alone; the guests he had been expecting had arrived. All were mounted, charging towards us in a horde, the leaders carrying flaming torches to light their way. Finally we passed the apex, then stopped short -- the view before us was not at all as we had expected. The town sparkled exquisitely below, an enchanted wonderland we had risked our lives to reach; the scent of civilization was intoxicating to my starved senses, but we would never reach it. The opposite end of the bridge was entirely blocked off by debris and a massive barricade.



set up by masons making repairs, these preventing anyone from both boarding the bridge and leaving it; the masons had gone home for the night, there was no one on the dock to help us. With no reason to go further, our flight to freedom had ended. We darted to the side of the bridge, peering over the ledge into the river below; the air was cold, the water surely colder.

The moon was high now, extending a path of light to us over the water as if to offer another way out. I grasped Anne's icy hand and studied her face, sweet and lovely even at the mouth of hell. We were seconds away from being caught, and I knew that whatever life lay before me at Bainbridge was no life at all; in all likelihood, I would not survive a year. The river lapped softly at the pillars. "Come home..." it whispered. Turning back to Anne, I believed she had heard it too. An eerie calm washed over me, and I was no longer afraid.

"Can you swim?" I asked Anne.

"No," she answered, distantly, "but I wasn't going to."

"Neither was I," I said.

We embraced each other like sisters; we did not speak again.

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I opened my eyes to the clang of church bells. Judging their number, it was early morning. I was flat on my back, my body stiff and cold. Looking up, I could see the spire of a tall cathedral towering over me; it made me dizzy, but there was nowhere to fall. I felt the surface I lay upon; a stone...no, a wooden board. My hands explored the ground around me -- grass, damp earth, and, in the air, the smell of decay. I knew I was not dead and in Heaven because, if I were, I would surely not continue to feel such physical pain as I still did. I raised my head to glance around me; dozens of bodies were laid out upon planks just like mine. They were all women, and they were all dead. "This is just what it is like below the ground," I told myself, "right below us, now..." I wondered how many layers underneath the Earth's crust the bodies went. I tried to lift myself, and every inch of my being punished me for the effort. At the opposite end of the yard, two men carried the body of a girl freshly plucked from the river, her face blue, her soaked garments watering the grass below; the men tossed her roughly onto an empty plank, and her limp body hit the ground with a dull, wet thud. Having managed to stand upright, I surveyed my surroundings; the dead women were of vastly varying age, some very old, some young as I was. They lay in various states of undress, most at the other side of the churchyard wall, pelting pebbles at the dead girls and howling over the naked ones. An old woman shooed them away, then resumed her charitable task of covering the bare bodies with coarse blankets. I gave thanks that I to a gentleman's arm, wandered amongst the dead, their tearstained faces desperate with the only hope left to them: that of identifying their missing daughter, sister, mother... Would they have the privilege of burying her, albeit not in holy ground, or of the dead hung wooden plaques roughly painted with the word: UNIDENTIFIED. I turned my focus towards the individual corpses; some of them had no faces, others were missing limbs, and I imagined that most of them could only be identified, if at all, by a ring perhaps, or some other bit of jewelry, though even this was doubtful as the relatively unguarded site must surely be a treasure trove to pickpockets, not to

UNIDENTIFIED

mention corpse thieves and those whose monstrous tastes prefer the dead to the living... My interest was then captured by a queer old man who was absorbed in the mixing of a pot of plaster. I watched as he spread a thin layer upon whichever of the lifeless faces he fancied, then removed it a short while later once it had dried. What one might want with such a death mask I could not guess. As I neared, the man looked up at me; his rosy cheeks and cheery whistle seemed terribly out of place within the morbid scene.

"Ah, so it's you then! Pity you're not dead, isn't it?" said the man.

"A pity it may be," said I, bewildered, "though it seems a bit rash to decide just yet."

The old man heartily laughed, then continued without pausing his work.

"Yes, yes...well, just the same, I had hoped to get to you next...you'd make a fine plaster indeed, just the sort for my collection...yes, the very sort."

"Hmm, indeed," I answered, wishing only to shut him up for my head was spinning awfully. "Incidentally, what on earth do you do with...oh, never mind, I don't wish to know."

The old man looked hard at my face.

"Yes, yes...the very sort...I don't suppose you'd be willing...no, no, no, it wouldn't do, too much life in your features, far too much life...though you might do well without that mark on your cheek there...now, how's a girl get herself a sore that shape?"

"What shape?" I asked.

"Why, it's a perfect heart, that's what it is alright."

I touched the spot but could only feel the sting. The plaster man resumed his work, lifting the dried mask from the face of the girl on the ground before him. The girl was Anne. She was a ghastly grey, her rust-coloured braids still pinned neatly around her head as I had last seen them. A curious sort of smile curled her blue lips, as though she kept a secret that the rest of us would never know, and I was not sad for her. A death of our own design was better than what lives we knew -- what lives we had to look forward to. Anne had succeeded where I had failed, and she was free while the confines of this world were still mine; somehow, I was alive, and I only hoped I would not live to regret it. The old man interrupted my meditations.

"Yes, yes..." he muttered, "would have been a nice pair you two, looking so alike and all..." He turned his peculiar gaze back to me for what seemed a very long time, before resuming his work. "'Tis a real pity you're not dead."

"No, Sir," said I, kneeling down on the dirt beside Anne's body. "You've already captured the most beautiful face in this yard...you don't need mine."

Suddenly, I noticed the Master Key of Bainbridge, still wound on its chain about my wrist. I thought to leave it with Anne, to be buried with her in whatever pauper's grave she was to rest in, but decided against it; should the scavengers come, the key would only be nabbed, and somehow I did not like to think of it back in the hands of a criminal of any sort. I would keep it, I resolved, and wear it on me always, as a remembrance of Anne and of the freedom she had given me. It may indeed remind me of Bainbridge and the Count, but, if it did, I would think only of how we had won and he had lost.

"Did you know this poor child then, my girl?" the old man asked.

"Anne? A little. She saved my life."

And she had. Her intervention was the key to my escape, and I promised her that I would make my second chance count.

I left the churchyard behind, and joined the mob on the streets of London.



I fought my way through the crowd. I was not at all sure of my destination, and I knew that I would be wise to think of shelter and a place to pass the coming night, but I wanted only to get as far away from Bainbridge as possible. Even now someone could be hunting for me. By noon, the encompassing fog had given way to a light rain; I was shivering, soaked, and painfully hungry. After hours of walking, I found myself in a part of the city where the buildings were smaller and closer together. The streets were narrow, and, with the gutter running directly in front of the houses, revoltingly foul. I thought of my old home...it could not be far away, but I had no desire to find my family, if any were yet living; they had sold me once -- why not try it again? I became aware of footsteps behind me. I tried to convince myself that it was merely my imagination, for there were dozens of people traversing the same route as I; why should there not be footsteps? Still, I felt myself walking a good deal faster, and, before I realized it, I was running. The streets became darker, as did the filthy turned sharply, and found myself racing down a street no wider than my outstretched arms. A man in torn work clothes came swiftly towards me pulling a rickety cart on which were stacked wooden cages crowded with live, screeching blackbirds. Before I could turn back, I was pressed up against the slimy stone wall, and the man and his upwards; I tried to follow the bird with my eyes, but, when I looked up, all I could see was a canopy of wet rags hung on lines passing from the houses on one side of the street to the other. Stirred by the shout of "gardez l'eau," I ducked into an opening in the wall just as a tub of rubbish and steaming water was poured down from the window above. Another turn and I was back into the fray. The sky was nearly black now, and the air had turned dangerously cold. Passing a darkened alleyway between two dwellings, I spotted a small barrel fire surrounded by a haggard band of beggars, just as I now was. Approaching, I asked if I might join them, but received no reply, and so I took the liberty of warming my hands over the meager flames. An ancient and toothless crone took pity on me and removed the tattered red shawl from her shoulders, insisting that I wear it whilst I remain in what she called her "home," but a little man with mud embedded in his whiskers took offense at my presence, and he chased me from the alley before I could return the shawl.

I had been without food for nearly three days, though, if you count the Thames, I suppose I had drunk quite enough water. Still, I was finally out in the open again, and so I turned my face to the sky, opening my mouth wide to taste the rain that poured down ever more heavily as the night settled in. Entering a swarming marketplace, I began to look at the awning-covered baker's carts with a different eye. Approaching one of the carts, I waited until the merchant was attending to a proper customer, then plucked one of the toast-brown buns from the pile, hiding it beneath my borrowed shawl. The bun's rightful owner never witnessed my fledgling attempt at thievery, but a young police constable walking directly behind me did. He took me roughly by the arm and commanded me to explain my actions. I told him that I was starving and had no money, and nowhere to go, managing to extract myself from his grip as I did so. Curiously, the constable did not oppose me. Instead, he looked closely at my face and, after a moment, told me to be good and follow him, adding that, if I did as he bade me, he would let me keep the bun I had and give me another besides. An easy sell under my current circumstances, I agreed, thinking that anywhere I might end up with a stranger was quite as good as anywhere I might end up on my own, and, if nothing else, the police station would have a roof. I ate most indelicately as the constable herded me through the streets.

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When we arrived at the station, I was led inside and unceremoniously shoved into a cell where I was to stay behind bars until the officers on duty decided what to do with me. Utterly exhausted, I lay down on the coarse wooden bench against the stone cell wall. The Chief Constable, an older man with a pipe peering out from beneath his white moustache, tossed me a pair of worn boots, which suggested that I would soon be on my feet again. I could not imagine that such a fuss was carried out for all the petty thieves in London, or else the prisons would have been bursting. No one attended to me for a very long time and I wondered if I had been forgotten -- just one of the countless bun thieves being apprehended that evening. Then, there were voices in the corridor, and I raised myself to see a tall female figure attired head to toe in a dark and heavy charcoal-grey crepe as though she were in perpetual mourning. By her side stood the young constable who had brought me to the station. The woman in grey produced a small, folded portrait from her handbag, much like those in the attic of the Conservatoire; she seemed to be comparing its subject with me.

"It's her, isn't it, Madame?" asked the constable, eagerly.

Snapping the portrait shut, the woman looked at me rather than at the young man who begged her attention.

"You were quite correct to alert us, Constable. You shall be rewarded for your powers of perception."

"Thank you, Madame. Pleasure to be of service to the institution."

The woman's voice struck me as a knife cutting through the air around her; her visage was concealed beneath a sheer veil and the shadows her hat cast upon her face. Only a hint of her left cheek and a twisted corner of her thin lips were visible to me, though they hinted at the face they belonged to, and I suspected that the countenance would match the voice.

The constable bowed, and, without looking in my direction (the coward!), left me alone with my mysterious visitor.

"Child," she began, "in the unfortunate event that you are called upon to speak, you may address me as Madame Mournington. I am given to believe that you are called Emily, and that you have ungratefully fled the house of your Master, the Count de Rothsberg, only a day since."

"Then, Madame, you believe wrongly," said I. "I have no Master."

The woman's laugh was low and mirthless.

"We all have a Master, Child."

She lifted her veil and I was accosted by two dark eyes deeply set into an aging yet still smooth face. Not smooth, no...taut, as though the flesh and all of its softness had eroded through years of trial, and what remained was only the thin white curtain that held the bones together. A sharp, aquiline nose imparted a decidedly haughty appearance that the woman's carriage and demeanor did nothing to deny. Yes, the face was cruel, but the eyes were far from it; smoldering in their depths, they might once have given off at least the illusion of beauty, if not the real thing. My romantic sensibilities led me to imagine these eyes the witnesses of more pain than cruelty, for there was nothing cold in them -- only a slow-burning sorrow.

I hope I shall be forgiven my too colourful and excessively imaginative depictions of the characters I chance to meet -- I have been so long in the company of monotonous acquaintances that I find too much in the people and things that are new to me. Be that as it may, the lady in grey elicited from me both a strong dislike and a sort of pity, the latter of which I knew was very likely displaced.

"What do you want of me, Madame? I suppose you are sent by the Conservatoire?"

"Then you believe wrongly, Child. I am not from your Conservatoire -- they no longer have the slightest interest in you, you may be sure of that. No, you have managed to make yourself quite worthless to any who have been entrusted with your care to this point."

"It is they who are worthless to me. I do not covet their regard, nor do I intend to ingratiate myself back into their society."

"Society," the woman harshly interrupted, "is no longer your concern. I am directed to remove you from society entirely, where you would threaten to contaminate those around you with your insolence, ingratitude, violent tendencies, thievery, and, as it has now been proven by your sinful attempt on your own life, madness."

"Madness? This is madness! Whomever has directed you is mad, and I shall not suffer to be told by one more person, begging your pardon, Madame, where I am to be removed to."

"You prefer to remain here in prison, then?"

"I do, Madame."

"I see. Well, I am sorry to abduct you from your abode of choice, but that is



quite impossible."

From her handbag, Madame Mournington produced a large envelope, sealed with blood-red wax; she removed a document from the envelope and held it before me to inspect.

"As you can see, wretch, you have no say in the matter. The good Headmaster of your Conservatoire, he who took you from poverty to be raised with every luxury, has writ down that you were either melancholy and useless or otherwise disruptive and wild, a condition which shows to have ripened into actual insanity during your brief stay under the beneficent roof of your subsequent Master, the Count de Rothsberg, who so generously offered to take over your board and expenses by allowing you shelter within his own house as an act of undeserved charity. The Count has documented, though it gave him great pains to do so (such a complete lack of malice in a man, no matter how he is provoked, is truly remarkable), that once inside his home, you responded with a perverse morosity to every entertainment set before you, to every enjoyment of which you were invited to partake, and that you chose instead to conspire with the miserable housemaid (another charity case, I have been informed) to steal valuables from the household and to do actual violence to the Count himself, something the police have been given absolute proof of, so severe were his injuries resulting from your wickedness. It follows here that, having already converted the housemaid's character to madness, you convinced the girl (whom the Count had cherished as his own child) to flee with you, and with the express intent to take your own lives in the river Thames, thereby committing such a sin as only a lunatic could contemplate without shame: Suicide. No doubt you felt the guilt of your crimes, and, lacking the moral fortitude already burning for her deeds in the Hell that is reserved for all unholy suicides, and so her punishment is of no concern to us -- that we give into the Lord's hands. However, as you were pulled from the river half drowned but yet living, we, civilized society, the men of law, and the institution from whence I am dispatched, are given the task of carrying out the Lord's just punishment here on Earth for the retribution of your soul, and for both the example and the safety of society. Now, make no attempt to deny anything -- I see your madness makes you quarrelsome -- for, once again, you will see the unmistakable proof written down thusly, as though proof were even required in a case this plain."

"Why could he have just let me go?" I whispered to myself, gazing in awe at the document in my hand. "I wouldn't have said anything..."

"The moment you went missing from Bainbridge," my visitor continued, "the Count, still harbouring the fatherly sentiments wasted on such as you, alerted every police station throughout London to be on their guard, and watching for a wretch of your description so that you may be rehabilitated back into his charitous embrace, should you chance to have been pulled from the water alive. You were first spotted in the dead-yard behind the cathedral where, after being fished out of the Thames by the morning boats, the week's suicides are deposited and laid out for identification -- a shameful amount of suicides we have had of late, truly shameful, truly wicked... The constable who saw you first was unsure, and so followed you through the streets where he caught you thieving, and more than likely planning to prostitute yourself -- what else would you do, a cheeky girl your age, with no where to go? The good officer assured himself of your identity, then placed you under arrest, and not a moment too soon if you ask me, which, incidentally, he did. The Count de Rothsberg was then notified, and, at last, came to his senses; upon hearing the news that your criminal deeds had only increased since you quit his home and degraded his hospitality, the Count tearfully gave in to reason, and it was agreed between all parties that, based upon the overwhelming evidence against you, the only society you ought to be allowed to keep should be the society of other lunatics like yourself."

Her narrative, though lengthy, was scarcely long enough for me to comprehend the contents of the document I had been trying to make sense of; such irrational reasoning, such bizarre accusations -- I felt as if in a dream -- hazy, bewildered, and blind.

"Lunatics like myself...what is this?"

I lifted my eyes from the paper to find my mistress positively beaming with self-righteousness; I met her gaze.

"Am I being committed to an insane asylum?"

"Not just any insane asylum!" she exclaimed indignantly, as though I had gravely offended her. "Though you certainly do not deserve it, you are a very lucky girl indeed, for you have been assigned a bed in the most progressively innovative, the most morally experimental, the most, ah, the most ingeniously directed medical institution for the mentally ill, led by my own dear son, Dr. Montmorency Stockill. You, unworthy child, are now an inmate of the Asylum for Wayward Victorian Girls."

Madame Mournington clapped her hands for assistance, and two prison guards carrying a selection of leather straps, heavy chains, and a straight-waistcoat entered my cell.

"Now, child, I abhor a fuss and dislike noise in general, so I demand your complete cooperation and am prepared to extract it from you, willingly or otherwise. Do you intend to come quietly, or not?"

I studied the instruments of restraint waiting ominously in the hands of the two guards; my body had not the strength to endure one more round of violence; I could survive the loss of no more blood, and I knew it.

"Madame," said I, "I come as quietly as the dead."

"Brilliant! Only the light restraints, gentlemen."

Snapping her fingers, Madame Mournington quit the cell and went to arrange herself in the carriage outside. The guards came forward with their tools; my borrowed shawl was torn from my shoulders and left lying on the damp and filthy floor; a broad leather collar was buckled around my neck, and a leash was attached to the brass ring at the front; I was forced into the straight-waistcoat, and my arms were folded before my chest and tied tightly together behind me. Roughly was I led by my neck to the waiting carriage, and all I could think was, "and these are the light restraints?"



# THE ASYLUM

FOR WAYWARD VICTORIAN GIRLS



No. 22,602

## ASYLUM FOR WAYWARD VICTORIAN GIRLS: ADMISSION FORM

NAME *Emily (surname unknown)*DATE OF ADMISSION *— ?*Age and Sex *17 years, female*Married, Single, or Widowed *single*If any Family *none*Occupation *—*Habits of Life *—*Religious Persuasion *? Church of England*Brought by Whom *Mrs. Munnington - Asylum H.M.*Form of Insanity *Melancholia — Suicidal*Supposed Cause *hereditary*If Hereditary *yes*If Suicidal *yes*If Dangerous to Others *yes*If Destructive to Property *yes*State of Bodily Health *good*Marks of Violence (if any) *self-inflicted [mark on R. cheek [heart shaped]]*FACTS SPECIFIED IN MEDICAL CERTIFICATE UPON WHICH  
OPINION OF INSANITY IS FOUNDED

1. Facts indicating Insanity observed by Medical Man

*to be determined*

2. Other facts indicating Insanity communicated to him by others

*Attempted suicide by leaping into the Thames, prior to which was physically violent towards Guardian, one Count de Rothsberg. Subsequent to rescue from drowning by fishing boat, stole valuable goods from London merchants. Intent to prostitute. Taken into police custody.*

ORDER SIGNED BY

DATED *— ?**— UNFORTUNATE GIRL'S MISUAL CONSERVATOIRE**— Count de Rothsberg**— Madame Munnington - Stockill*



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The wind screamed around the carriage; the wheels rattled, and, though the third iron gate was looming before us, we seemed to be eternally racing towards it, making no progress. A bird, something like a raven but a great deal larger, soared overhead, emitting a harsh, metallic shriek into the raging sky. It circled above the ever-approaching gate, and, as my eyes followed its path, I again caught sight of the sharp spikes gleaming in the pummeling rain. Still galloping on at a reckless pace, I heard the muffled squeals of what sounded like a swarm of insects; peering out the carriage window, I swore I saw (though I did not trust my senses at the time) a great pack of rodents -- perhaps a hundred, perhaps more -- sleek, furry bodies skimming the earth, leaping over each other, obsidian eyes sparkling. A quivering mass, they swam over the cobblestones like one creature -- squid's ink spilling into the sea and infecting it with deep black within seconds. How they were able to keep up with the horses mystified me, and when the swarm dispersed and shot on ahead of us, they darted in and out beneath the wheels of the carriage and around the horses' hammering hooves, yet were never trampled. Breathlessly, I watched them as they melted together again and slipped beneath the gate to the other side like a gush of dark water -- the tide coming in. It was all so ghastly...so sickeningly enthralling; my body convulsed in a trembling wave -- a heady blend of horror and wild anticipation.

And then!

The final gate crashed to a close behind us, and we were at the ultimate precipice at last.

Three...two...one...

The doors began to open. There was an awful grinding of metal, a clashing of loosened chains, and, with the sky seeming to come down around us, it appeared: The Asylum.

From the Asylum for Wayward Victorian Girls,

Emily (with a 'J')

### Asylum Letter No. III

I cannot remember how I traveled from the carriage up the steps to the front doors, but there I stood before the massive, moonlit structure, a monumental fortress of brick and limestone, its gothic splendor a stark contrast to the hundreds of bar-crossed windows punctuating the vast wings that reached out on either side like long arms open in a wide but disingenuous welcome. Gripping the leash attached to my heavy collar was a colossal brute, hunched and mute save for the occasional grunt. He had ridden with us in the carriage, filling the confined quarters with the stench of rotting meat -- I wondered that my mistress could endure it. The leviathan had hold of me with one filthy paw while his other struck a large brass bell that hung from an alcove above the doors. The rude clanging produced no response from within, and Madame Mournington stamped her boots on the frozen porch in frustration, cracking the thin ice.

"A plague on these blasted servants!" she fumed.

Fumbling inside of her grey wool traveling cloak, Madame Mournington produced a key attached by a long chain to a silver chatelaine brooch pinned at her waist. The brooch also held various other instruments: a tiny pair of scissors, a silver pencil, a needle case, a thimble, and an oval locket with a child's cameo on the face. I could not imagine Madame Mournington's heart capable of caring for anyone enough to indulge in the sentimentality of a locket.

Without warning, a bloodcurdling scream from within the Asylum pierced the night air, and my heart leapt against my chest. The giant at my side began to breath heavily, sniffing the air like a hungry animal. Taking no notice, Madame Mournington fit her key into the lock on the heavy door, and had scarcely begun to turn it when the doors swung open. Pulling them inwards were two smartly dressed butlers; they beckoned us inside with a bow and a sweep of their white-gloved hands. Madame Mournington snapped her fingers; the giant dropped my leash and ambled away towards an outbuilding further along the Asylum grounds. Madame Mournington advanced into the grand Entrance Hall whilst I remained in the doorway, the wind rushing in around me, blowing leaves and rain onto the polished floor; my gaze fell first upon an enormous clock dominating the space above the mantelpiece at the far end of the Hall. The clock struck four, and time seemed to stop.

Before I knew what was happening, I was on the ceiling looking down at myself; standing on the black-and-white checkered marble, I was so small, a mouse in a mansion -- cold, wet, and utterly alone. Could there be another soul in this world quite so alone as I? If something were to happen to me, would anybody care? Would anyone even know? From my perch high up in the vaulted rafters, I commanded my feet to move me forward, but my instruction bore far less influence over my movements than did the blazing fire before me. My footsteps echoed loudly, pulling me back into my body.

Tall ivory candles enshrouded in gold sparkled from their place on the mantelpiece. The hearth itself was so large I could have walked into it on my toes were I so inclined. On the left of the fire, richly upholstered chairs were assembled casually around a tea table set with bone china and laden heavily with delicacies almost too beautiful to eat. Cakes stacked high and frosted with swirls of icing and lemon drops were flanked by tiered trays of strawberry tarts; a plate of biscuits glittered with coloured sugar; exquisitely sculpted marzipan fruits lay arranged in clusters; chocolates wrapped in crisp gold paper were tucked into every chink in this display, heartbreaking to a hungry captive.

To the right, a small gathering of ladies lounged upon overstuffed settees, books and needlework in their laps, while others sat around a lace-covered card table playing at whist or some other such game. All were dressed elegantly, yet with modesty; their



hair was neatly braided and coiled into becoming styles. An aura of calm and serenity surrounded the happy group, and an elderly woman in mauve sat at an antique harpsichord and provided that absurd plinking without which such a picture could never be complete.

On the papered walls (broad claret and cream stripes, quite lovely) hung large paintings in majestic gilt frames. One canvas depicted a Persian cat sitting regally upon a yellow cushion; another was a still life of two pears and a pineapple, and there were several compulsory landscapes. Small brass plates beneath each painting bore a different female name, and I assumed that the patients themselves were the artists behind these mundane works, though why any girl, no matter how wayward, would choose to paint two pears and a pineapple was beyond my ability to reason.

It was another painting that dominated the Hall, however -- an ostentatiously grandiose portrait showing a man of perhaps forty-five with dark, loose hair framing a gaunt and sober face. He was clean-shaven, and wore a medal and two red ribbons on the breast of his coat. With black eyes, brooding and deeply set, he was not unhandsome, but there was something about the twist of his lips I did not like. Beneath the portrait was a plaque engraved with the following words:

DR. MONTMORENCY STOCKILL: A Savior to the Weaker Sex

So this was the "ingenious director" -- the dear son of Madame Mournington.

Numerous gas-lamps brightly illuminated this welcoming scene, and, were it not for the good Doctor's unsettling portrait, I might have wondered if I had somehow been mistaken in my dread of this place. At least there was a fire. But what of that awful scream? Had I imagined it?

All that I here describe my wide eyes had digested before I had taken three steps inside the Asylum. One step more and the front doors were slammed shut and bolted behind me, the resounding crash sending two cheery housemaids scurrying forward; the maids wore stiffly starched white caps and lace aprons tied over their trim grey frocks; their unnaturally broad smiles brightening their already ruddy complexions. The maids curtsied low as the two butlers moved to take my mistress's cloak (I supposed that an institution of this size, if not a cloak, would require the services of at least two butlers). Upon rising, the maids recited the following in perfect unison:

"On behalf of our happy household, we welcome you to the Asylum for Wayward Victorian--"

"STOP!" interrupted Madame Mournington, slapping away the hand of the butler who was endeavoring to take her umbrella. "Charming performance, everyone, truly charming, but I suggest you all stop before you turn my stomach. It is only us -- the girl has no relatives to impress; she is quite alone in the world."

"No relatives?" said a butler. "Well, don't that just make our job relatively easy, eh, Smythy?"

"Ohhhh..." groaned one of the maids.

"Easy as hittin' a deer out of a tree," crowed butler number two, the apparent Smythy.

"That don't make a bleedin' bit o' sense, you daft nutter!" joined the second maid.

One of the women lounging on a settee shouted over to the maid who had just spoken.

"Mary, you're a damned dollymop, makin' me sit here when you know bloody well I can't read. I get to be the 'ousemaid next time, and you can sit on yer arse with a bloomin' bible pretendin' to be mad."

"Oh, shut up, tart" shouted Mary, tearing off her cap and tossing it over at the woman on the settee; she missed. "You're as mad as any o' them locked up, you are...it's not as though you've got to do any acting."

"Silence, slatterns!" roared Madame Mournington, pounding her umbrella on the floor.

"One more word out of any of you, and you will all lose cellar privileges for the month. And besides," she added, addressing the maids, "your speech lacked feeling, and, Mary, your cap was more crooked than your aim. See to it. Now, I shall take my tea in Dr. Stockill's drawing room. He must be informed of the new patient at once. As for you," she turned to the counterfeit butlers, "see that you're quicker to the door in future -- I wait on no one. Now, clear off, the lot of you...but not you, Maudsley. Turn in your finery and take the girl to Quarantine for the night. We shall evaluate her behaviour there before deciding where to place her permanently."

"To the Salt Box? With pleasure," replied the butler to my right.

Removing his gloves, he eyed me closely.

"Keep your bloody kecks on, Maudsley," called Madame Mournington as she exited the Hall, her chin pointed high, heavy skirts swishing.

I glanced over to the ladies cavorting in the corner; they had discarded their perfectly coiffed hair, revealing their own slovenly arranged locks. Having ripped off their gowns, I saw that some of the ladies who had been sitting with their backs to the door had in fact not been ladies at all -- it seems the common Asylum visitor was never meant to get too close. All actors piled their castoff costumes onto one of the settees and bounded off to their regular duties. Was all of this contrived simply to convince the friends and family of a mad girl that this is a safe place to leave her?

I turned around to find everyone gone, save Maudsley and myself. He had hold of my leash now, and snapped it sharply just to show who was master of this game. Without the use of my arms, my balance was lost and I stumbled forward; Maudsley did not help me up. Instead, he twisted a knob beneath one of the gas-lamps, and, instantly, the fire I had been longingly gazing into went black. All throughout the Hall the lamps dimmed, and I heard a rumbling from somewhere below us, then the turning of gears; the ground shook. The floor we stood upon began to sink. No! We were not sinking, the walls around us were rising -- first those to my left and right, then the panels further down the Hall, then the panels beyond those, until reaching the panel behind the hearth itself, the one bearing the great clock as well as the venerable Dr. Stockill's portrait. The walls were being pulled up into the rafters, out of sight to anyone who didn't know where to look and what to look for. The settees and the card table began to move as well, and I saw that they were fixed to a circular section of the floor that could rotate whatever sat upon it behind the actual walls once the pretty veneers were lifted out of the way. The pieces fit together like a perfect machine. What ingenious mind had designed a system of such mechanical brilliance? And why? Away went the furniture, away went the tea table, cakes and all, none of which had been real. What was left was a stark, cold cavern, drafty and damp, with rubble in the corners and bits of flaking plaster patching the spots where the walls didn't quite meet the ceiling. Every surface was horribly crooked; the framework appeared to be falling apart around us. How long before it collapsed completely? A week? A year? I could scarcely believe that anyone was allowed to live in such conditions, let alone those who required medical care. Maudsley tugged me forward, but I pulled back, genuinely frightened.

"Come on now, love," he jeered in his rough tongue, "is that really how we want to start off in our new home? We're going to be difficult, now?"

"This is not my home," said I.

"Oh, 'course it's not. Mummy and Daddy are coming back for us -- that's what they all think, poor nutters. Now, make yourself more pleasant or I will get rough and I will enjoy it."

Maudsley was no butler; he was nothing above a common bully, and he made me want to bathe. He dragged me onwards towards the hearth. Now flameless, it was a gaping hole in the wall -- if the Asylum's wings were the arms of the building, then this was the mouth. Maudsley stepped inside of the hearth, and another snap of the leash told me I had no choice but to follow. Into the catacombs I went. We were inside a cramped tunnel now, lit only by the lantern Maudsley held before him. Further along we walked; something foul permeated the stale air that grew colder with every step. After what seemed like miles, we arrived at a gate made of crossed iron bars set into the narrow walls. Unlocking the bolt, Maudsley pulled me forward and shoved me into the cell beyond. The gate slammed shut; the bolt was dropped.



"I can't see a thing," I called out to him. "Please, let me have the light. Surely you have matches to find your way back with."

I tried to reach out, only then remembering that my hands were still bound behind my back.

Maudsley laughed. "Give fire to a lunatic? Not likely. Best of luck to you in gettin' through the night, love."

I thought he had walked away, but I was mistaken, for he suddenly thrust his hand through the bars and seized my leash, pulling me hard against the cold metal.

"Then again...I think we could have some fun together, you and me. I can get you things you want, you know. That's how it works in this pit, love. I can help you."

Maudsley had his rough hand about my waist now.

"At risk of being rude, sir, I would sooner die," I replied, wrenching my body from his grasp.

"That you probably will," he laughed.

Maudsley turned and walked back through the tunnel, flickering lamplight growing fainter until it was gone. I turned to face the darkness, then panicked.

"Wait! My hands! How do I get out of this thing?" I shouted through the bars.

The shout came back.

"Make friends!"

I took a step further into the cell. Gradually, my eyes began to adjust, and I could make out several lumpy objects scattered about the dirt floor. Some of the lumps were moving. I heard mutterings...groans...now and then, someone would shriek and then fall silent again, just enough of a shock to make me leap near out of my skin each time. The air was close, and it was difficult to breathe. I edged my body along the damp wall, hoping to locate an empty patch of ground to claim for myself. Outside, the clouds shifted and a small barred window high up in the wall let in a weak but welcome beam of light. Most of the cell remained shrouded in darkness, but the moonlight passed along the opposite wall near the ceiling, and I saw the glint of something, like a firefly in the night -- fleeting, but extraordinarily present. Then, it was gone. I looked hard at the spot, but could see nothing. There! There it was again! I froze; from high atop what appeared to be a tower of tea crates, I saw two eyes gleaming down at me. My vision adjusting still further, I could now distinguish the silhouette of a creature -- something crouched like a gargoyle -- perched upon the crates. I stood stock-still, afraid to move lest the creature should attack. But it did not attack. It spoke.

"Go to sleep!" came a harsh whisper.

My heart pounded.

"What?" I whispered back.

"Lay yourself down and stay quiet. We must be ready."

The whisper was delivered with a slight accent, something familiar...

"Ready? For what?"

"Ready for them...ready when they come."

"Who's coming?"

"Go to sleep! I'm keeping watch."

Taking advantage of the bit of light, I searched the floor for a clear spot, and found a patch of ground scattered with dry straw, and without a body already attached to it. My hands still bound behind my back, it was all I could do to kneel down, but I did

not think sleep possible anyway, especially now that I knew I was being watched. On my knees, I looked up once more.

"Who are you?" I asked.

"I am your captain."

All at once, the moon shone full, and I saw the creature. I saw a white shift... I saw striped stockings, black and white, black and white, black and white... I saw a mass of dark hair on top of which was perched a bizarre tri-corner hat that looked as though it had been fashioned from torn scraps of paper. I saw the eyes, sparkling as they stared forward, unwavering, at our prison door... I saw a ray of daylight bleeding through the bars... An alarm was ringing loudly. I was lying on my meager pile of straw as the girls around me scurried about the cramped cell. A thin layer of straw had been spread over me, my collar had been removed, and my hands had been freed.

From the Asylum for...oh, bother! Enough of these formalities, Diary, you know who I am, and I must conserve my pencil lead...





## Hospital Entry 12: FUNHOUSE MIRRORS

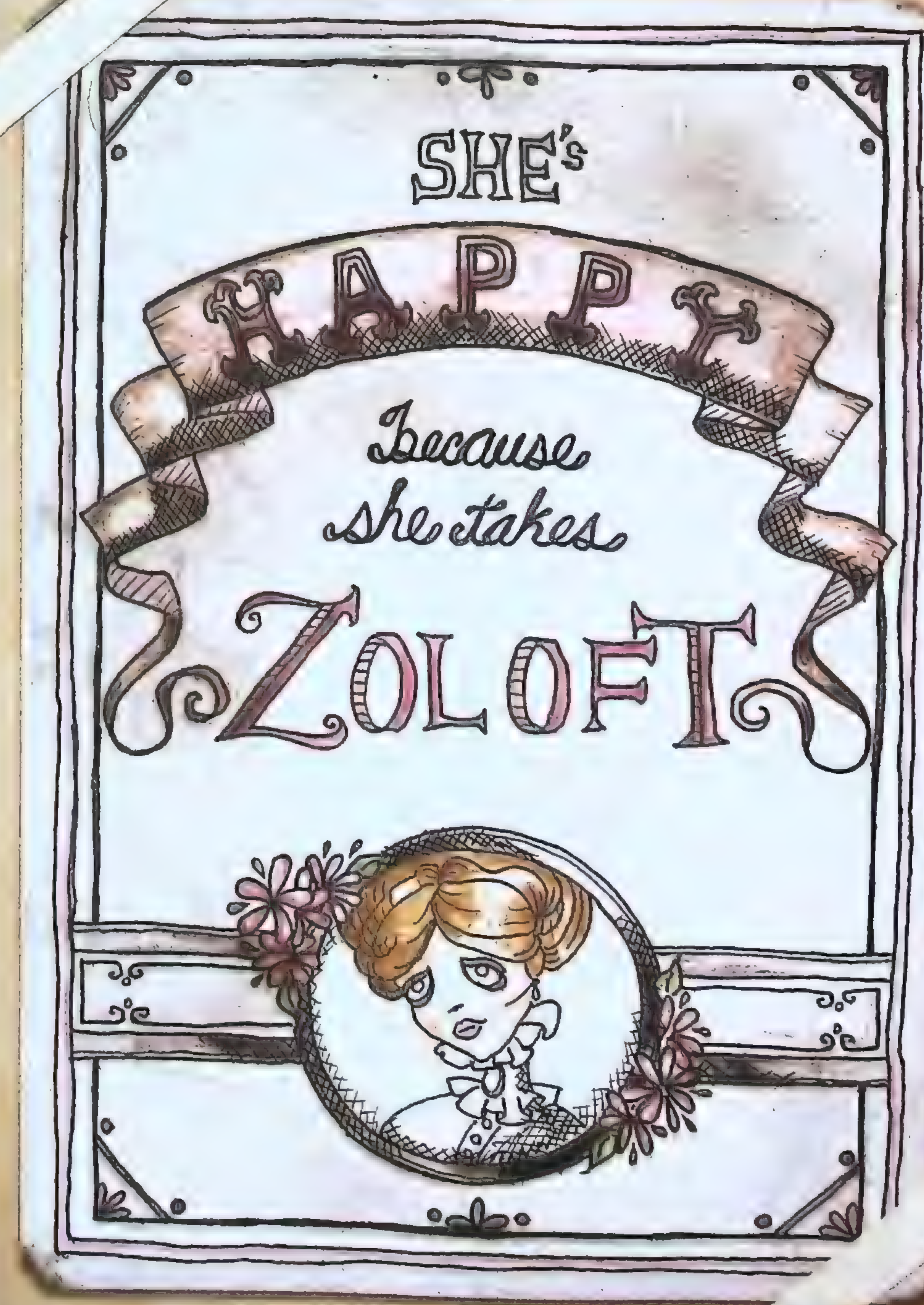
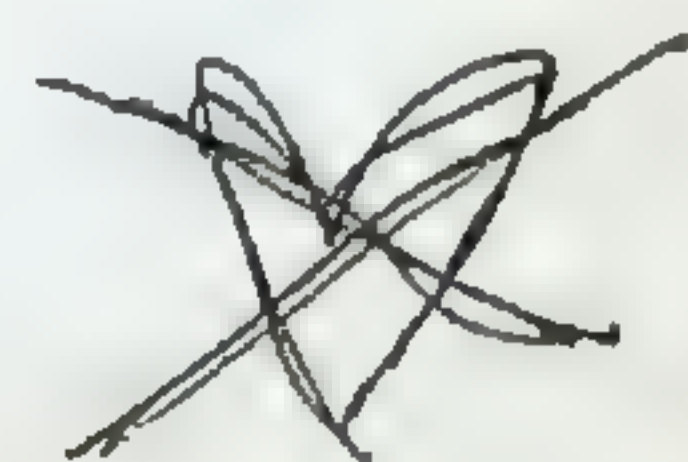
I have not showered since the morning I was committed, which seems like ages ago. Having used up all of the moist towelettes (is there an actual name for these?) I was able to stash from my days in the ER downstairs, I am left only with a supply of rough brown paper napkins which I douse with soap and water and then use to scrub down with whenever I manage to find myself in the bathroom alone.

There is a shower, of course, but not on pain of death (odd choice of words in my case, I do realize, but I can't think of anything else at the moment) would you find me inside of it. In addition to things like bacterial growth and other obvious filth, the shower is not private, and cannot be used unsupervised. I have a hard enough time knowing that there are no locks on the stall doors, and I simply cannot stomach another breach of dignity, to say nothing of privacy. And besides, after our morning weigh-ins where I am consistently informed that I am far under my "ideal" weight, all I need is for a nurse to see me naked -- I guarantee they'd have me hooked up and force feeding within the hour.

Shortly after my arrival in Maximum Security, I was occupied in scrubbing my face with the brown paper napkins and endeavoring to make myself somewhat presentable (to whom?) when I noticed that, whenever I moved, my face would change shape in the mirror. Upon close examination, I saw that the mirror is not a mirror at all, but a thin sheet of polished metal. Hell, it probably isn't even metal; it's probably plastic painted to look like metal...anyway! I tapped on the surface. Yep. Unbreakable. The flexible sheet was badly warped, and, as I dried my face with yet more brown paper napkins, I considered whether it was really such a fabulous idea to offer lunatics no way to see their own faces save in what is essentially a funhouse mirror. Now that I think of it though, it's perfect...absolutely perfect. Another joke on us, and I can take it. I can even laugh at it.

But there is one thing I wonder: If and when we are released back into the real world, will we take this distorted image of ourselves back with us?

I'M NOT CRAZY  
AND NEITHER AM I.





#### Asylum Letter No. IV

Chaos and confusion. A door opposite the one I had entered the night before swung open, and my fellow prisoners fell silent. Most kept their heads down as an attendant Determined to catch on quickly and thus remain unnoticed, I fell in line behind a tall girl with open sores up and down her arms. We were marched out to what I later learned was called the Bathing Court. The forest of leafless trees was a black web lit from behind by the lonely grey of early morning. It was painfully cold and frost covered the ground, crackling under my bare feet, but it was good to be outside after a night and outwardly visible state of health, but they shared the blank, hopeless stare of striped stockings -- a costume clearly not designed for protection against the elements, or from anything else for that matter.

As we walked, I tried to spot my creature of the previous night amongst the girls in line. Just then, a girl marching two places ahead of me turned her head and shot me a devious smile, wrinkling her nose as she did so. I was taken aback, yet oddly comforted that she was there. Gone was the imposing posture and the makeshift hat, but the glint of the eye was the same, and the tangled mass of dark hair was unmistakable.

The Bathing Court was located at the back of the Asylum; this told me that the tunnel I had travelled the night before ran straight through the massive structure. I had thought that the level of the building I had walked through was the ground floor, but it was in fact raised off the ground by a level beneath, which I assumed must be the basement, though it, quite strangely, was not underground. Now that I thought on it, I remembered the steps we had climbed to reach the front doors the night before, as well as the grinding of the gears beneath me as I stood in the Entrance Hall. There was clearly a floor below where the machinery was housed.

We were not the only ones being marched to the Court; from the wards on either side of the Asylum poured hundreds upon hundreds of girls. Their appearance was staggering; other walked unbound as I did, though we were all guarded closely by attendants carrying rods and straps. By the contorted frames, bruises, and dejected countenances, it was clear that these tools of correction were employed liberally against any girl who stepped out of line. But, my God! The sheer mass of us! We were a veritable army, terrifying in our numbers if not in our strength.

Now standing in perfect rank-and-file, we were ordered to come forward, ten at a time, to stand against a stone wall at one side of the Court. I learned by example that, on our way to the wall, we were expected to remove our shifts and stockings and toss them into an enormous laundry bin. For me, this meant the removal of the remaining shred of the key I still held in the pocket of my gown -- I had put it there the day before after suspecting that, on my wrist, it might be a target for London's petty thieves (I surreptitiously hid the key in my hand, then slipped it into my mouth. Naked, we stood before the man with the watering hose, one end of which was attached to a mechanical pump. Without warning, we were hit with a powerful torrent of frigid water. Three blasts and we were ordered off the Court, but not before taking a clean shift from the bin at the far end of the wall as we passed, as well as a pair of clean stockings from the clothesline where they had been pinned out to dry, fluttering like striped serpents in the biting wind. We were then corralled into the Dining Hall as the next ten girls took their places before the firing squad, and thus the barbaric process continued until all were bathed.

It was in this way that I came to be just another of the ranks here in the Asylum -- dressed alike, treated alike, in class, in disgrace, in uniform.





### Hospital Entry 13: INTERVENTION

They are counting my caloric intake more strictly than an anorexic at a dinner party. In fact, they have charts that say exactly what one ought to weigh depending upon one's height, and they are viciously judging us all against these standards. And who came up with these standards anyway? The morbidly obese nurse? The half of America that's fat? As I am slowly figuring out, it isn't "us" they are judging at all -- rather, it is the thin ones; the fat ones here are assumed to be just fine.

\*\*\*

We are wandering in circles around the rooftop patio, a lunatic promenade. It is gray and cold, and I wonder when they will decide that enough is enough. I am beginning to fence and see the busy streets of Hollywood far, far below, but it's a different world. I could scream and nobody down there would hear me. I'm sure I wouldn't have been the first to try.

I complete another lap and a nurse catches up with me, a clipboard in her hand. She asks me if I could do her a "little favor" as soon as I have a minute (I've got all the minutes in the world, lady). Handing me a few sheets of paper stapled together, the nurse tells me that it's just a list of questions that would really help out the staff if I would answer. Although I assume it's one of those "How Am I Driving?" sort of customer service questionnaires, I feel almost flattered, as though my opinion actually matters.

"You can go to your room now and fill it out if you like, so you have some privacy."

What? You're letting me go to my room in the middle of the day? Alone? Privacy? Something is most definitely up. The nurse leads me back inside and down the hall; unlocking my room, she tells me to bring the form to the glass booth upfront as soon as I'm finished.

Seating myself on the edge of my bed, I look down at the first question.

1. How many times per day do you make yourself vomit?

Note: the question is not DO you make yourself vomit, but an assumed HOW MANY TIMES. Dear patient, your opinion is irrelevant. It's your word against ours.

Three pages of questions, not one of them asking whether I have an eating disorder, all of them just assuming that I do, and ordering me to expound upon it. It is unbelievable. Nobody sat down with me for a sensitively conducted chat -- nobody asked me anything at all; instead, they gave me a fucking form. Not five minutes of somebody's time was spent in assessing whether or not this form would even be appropriate, whether it would offend me, whether it would freak me out, or whether it would simply be unnecessary. If I answer as they clearly expect me to and tell them how much I hate my body and how I can't eat without making myself sick afterwards, or why I can't eat at all, will I then be handed another form telling me what to do about it? Are pamphlets the new psychotherapy? Un-fucking-believable.

The truth is that it would be near impossible for me to finish the average asylum meal under any circumstances, hospitalized or in the free world, because what the staff here thinks a person should be able to polish off three times a day is more than I can eat in a week, and this is not because I hate my body, but because I don't. Of course, I am enjoying my ten minutes of authorized privacy too much to simply go handing this form back now and telling them where to put it. No, if they want answers, then answers they shall receive.

I answer every question at great length, filling up the pages until there is no more space to fill. Then, I turn the pages over and write on the backs. I am flip. I am sarcastic. But I am not unkind. I simply want them to know precisely how I feel about this, and to comprehend exactly, and in intricate detail, how asinine their questions are ("Why are you continuously dieting when you're already too thin? How far above your ideal weight do you consider yourself? Do you believe in magical beings?"). I conclude my final answer with the declaration that unicorns are real, that I quite enjoy my relationship with food under normal circumstances, and that, despite everything I have already stated, I realize that they may require some proof of this, which is why I would like to inform them that I am a trained pastry chef, and that I would be delighted to cook the entire Psych Ward staff a gourmet French vegetarian dinner complete with chocolate hazelnut truffles just so long as they buy the ingredients. I have no expectation of how this will be received, but I am prepared to defend myself, not against the accusation of having an eating disorder, because, although I don't have one, it isn't a crime (not like suicide or anything), but against being called a liar, because I know that I will not be believed.

Determined to beat the staff to the proverbial punch, I skip down the hall to the office and, smiling, hand the papers back through the window slot to the nurse who had first given them to me. Without looking at my answers, she tells me that someone will be coming to talk with me in a moment. I can't wait.

Along comes a corpulent woman who introduces herself as the Hospital Nutritionist. She invites me, the nurse, and some other members of staff into a conference room, and we place ourselves around a large table as she flips through my answers, her face hardening as she does so. I will say nothing. I will simply wait for it...wait for it...

"Well, Emilie, it looks like we've wasted your time."

There it is!

"Listen," I say, trying to lessen the shock just a bit if only because there is still that pathetic part of me that hates to see others uncomfortable, "this really doesn't offend me, and, look around, what else am I going to do with my afternoon? But I would honestly like to know what made you give me this form, because I've got a lot of problems, but an eating disorder just isn't one of them."

"Well, you are very thin."

"Perhaps, but that can't be all. What specifically did I do to make you so sure that we needed to have this intervention? I would sincerely like to know."

"As I said, you are very thin, and we've noticed that you don't eat much."

I tell the Nutritionist and all of the assemblage that there are many reasons a person could be "very thin." For example: one may be in a mental hospital and living in a constant state of terror, leaving one with no appetite. For another: one could be incredibly depressed. Still another: I know it's taboo to say, but one could be naturally thin. God knows I've got friends that are half my size and eat like fucking horses. As for leaving food on the tray, I tell them that, if I am to be continually asked to eat American-sized meals three times a day, they will never see any change; it is simply impossible -- physically impossible -- for me to ingest as much as I am being given. And then something occurs to me.

"Oh!" I exclaim. "I think I know what made you think this about me! Tell me, was it when I was in Assessment yesterday and I was talking about how I felt when I learned that I was pregnant -- that I felt like an alien being was growing inside of me, and how it terrified me to the point of insanity? I remember making a gesture like this..."

I demonstrate my remembered motion, clutching my stomach as though trying to tear something out of it, all the while knowing that I am being judged for being horrified at the simple prospect of motherhood, my god given duty and highest calling according to the world we still live in.

The day before, I had been called into a similar conference room and asked to tell a story to the dozen doctors, nurses, and interns in attendance as they all sat around a table and took notes. I had undergone assessments of this kind twice before during my



stay in the Psych Ward; the student nurses and doctors from other wards were always present. I could choose to be flattered by this, but I don't have the ego for it, and, besides, it took me a while to figure out that this was unusual. In the assessment of the previous day, I had explained what I did for a living ("Are you famous?" they asked...wouldn't they know it if I were?), how many years I had been battling manic depression and losing, and why I tried to kill myself. I told them that I had developed several strategies whilst in this mental hospital to cope with my bipolar disorder and the constant desire to die (which was a lie, of course -- anything that was ever going to help me get better was not to be found within these walls). I simply hoped that, if I gave a very good performance, spoke in a clear voice, and made eye contact with everyone present, then they would consider letting me go. I had lost my calm though when explaining my reaction to a positive pregnancy test. This must be the reason for my being judged so incorrectly.

"No, that wasn't it at all," says the Nutritionist.

I am never honored with a satisfactory explanation of the reason that the staff felt all of this necessary. I am trying to get them to "level with me," but I can't, and I am the fool for trying. I am a nut in a nuthouse, and I would do well never to forget it. But, hurrah! I have just experienced an honest-to-god intervention, and, because no intervention is complete without a little irony, it is now dinnertime.

I have truly come to know what it is to be gagged by fear, to know that anyone around you can, and will, flip the fuck out at any time, to have your stomach tied in knots more tangled than Violet's hair, getting food caught in your throat without the power to make it go down, swallow dryly as many times as you will, and, standing behind you, a nurse so overweight she's on the verge of a heart attack, and she is judging everything you eat, and everything you leave behind.

The worst thing about being bipolar or mentally ill in any way is that any time you're legitimately sad - any time you're truly angry, and with good and clear reason, you will be told that you are only feeling as you are because of your illness. Every time your boyfriend is being an ass, and you call him on it, this is what you will hear, so get used to it: "Have you been taking your medication?" A life of non-credibility, even amongst those you love. This is what you face. Especially amongst those you love, it is the eternal equivalent of being asked if it's your "Time of the Month" every time you get upset. If this doesn't make you want to kill yourself, I don't know what will...

## Asylum Letter No. V

It was on my third day in the Asylum that I saw it: something gleaming from beneath the breakfast table in the Dining Hall. I peered below and recognized the little silver pencil that I had seen hanging from Madame Mournington's chatelaine on the night I had first arrived. It must have broken from its chain, and now there it was, waiting for me, just begging me to snatch it up and carry it away to my cell. The prospect of having something to write with was exhilarating...I felt that I simply must have the pencil, but I must also act with caution, for, if I moved to pick it up, the other girls would see, and I would likely lose my prize to someone taller and stronger than I. It was already reckless that I should keep Anne's key always tied just above my knee, though it was well hidden by the tall stockings we all must wear; I ought not to risk anything more. I decided to wait until breakfast was over. I felt quite sure I could obtain the pencil surreptitiously as we all rose to file back in line, ready to be led back to our wards. Dear God," thought I, "to be able to write...to have something, anything to do..."

Alas, when the bell rang for us to rise, a girl at my table fell to the ground in a seizure. An attendant rushed forward to drag her from the Hall before chaos broke out, as one thing does generally lead to another, and the remaining attendants swiftly ordered us up and into line. I reached my arm under the table, knowing it was not wise to do so, and was proven right as a leather strap whipped across my neck and I was forcibly put in my place with the other inmates.

Back in my cell that night, I relived the morning's events over and over again in my mind, truly hating myself for having lost something I never had, but which I was yet convinced that I could not live without. Then, I heard a sound from somewhere outside of the cell -- a sort of scurrying, or perhaps a tapping of fingertips, very, very quiet, but coming closer all the time until I was convinced that it was inside the cell, then even closer until I was quite sure it was nearing my bed. All fell silent. I waited. Then came the sound of something being dropped on the ground and rolling a short distance before coming to a halt. Whatever it was that had entered the cell left the same way as it had come, and, when I could no longer hear it, I extended my hand into the dark to touch the floor beside my bed. I could see nothing; it took all of my courage to feel along the splintered wood for God only knew what. Finally, my fingers found an object smooth and cold, only a few inches in length, and very thin. I picked it up and rolled it over in my hand, but I already knew exactly what it was.

And with that, Diary, we arrive at the present. It is the following evening, and I have been using the little silver pencil to tell my story such as you have seen unfold thus far. I have been writing on the scraps of striped paper torn from my cell walls, and I hope to find something more suitable before anyone notices the mess I will surely make before this is all over. Also, I do not know how long the pencil lead may last me, for it is almost gone and I have only just related my tale from the beginning to this point -- Heaven knows what the coming days hold for me. I shall perhaps have to be sparing in my entries in order to conserve these modest resources, but it will not be easy for me as the writing of these notes to myself is the only thing that may keep me sane in this God forsaken place. No one shall read them, and I do not care -- they are not for the world's blind eyes, but only for yours, Diary, whom I address as a friend, knowing well that you are merely the mirror of myself. No, it is the act of writing that may save me, for through my little silver pencil the story is exorcised; left inside my head, it smothers me. May the future grant us a happier chapter...



Asylum Letter No. VI

I did not come face to face with the great Dr. Stockill until I had endured five whole days in the Asylum. I had been installed in Ward A at the top of a steep and narrow staircase for the last three of them, my first two being spent in the dark of Quarantine. I was given to understand that the Doctor was occupied in his laboratory, being the Asylum Chemist as well as Head Physician and Superintendent. This was considered unusual, as most asylums employed a separate chemist who was well below the physician in rank and stature, but Dr. Stockill claimed to elevate chemistry from a profession to an art, and was said to be always at his experiments and making "new and useful discoveries," for which he was both respected and resented amongst his equally ambitious peers.

As I was led by Madame Mournington to the Doctor's chamber for the first time, an animal instinct from deep within me told me to run, but my escort had a tight grip on my arm, her sharp, skeletal talons digging into my flesh; the rings on the fingers of her other hand clicked against the large, tarnished key she held, the same that had opened the Asylum doors to me less than a week earlier. This was the closest view I had yet achieved of the key; the object had been burnished to a dull sheen, no doubt by our Headmistress's fastidious claws, yet it looked as though it had been much used, finish -- like many of the inmates here, it had simply lived too long. Down the rickety staircase we went, turning left onto the stark stone landing, and finally arriving at the Medical Floor. Upon reaching the door of the Doctor's chamber, Madame Mournington tapped lightly, and a silvery voice bade us to enter. I felt an icy draft rush up my legs and under my shift as I stepped across the threshold into a room decorated with such masculine refinement as to be entirely at odds with the deteriorating structure it resided in.

Dr. Stockill thanked his mother most courteously, and I was left alone with him. From behind his desk of richly polished wood, the Doctor tapped his long, tapered fingertips together and looked at me with unmistakable disdain. I was unknown to this man -- could he dislike me already? With studied delicacy, he lifted a document from his desk. The Doctor was quite as elegant as the portrait I had seen mounted so proudly in the Entrance Hall downstairs, though his black hair was now streaked with grey, and it cannot be denied that he appeared crueler in person; the lines were harsher, and the mouth that I had not felt at ease with in the painting coiled into a sneer as he spoke.

"No one's head may be higher than the king's," the Doctor said.

He did not look up at me, but continued to peruse the document.

"I'm sorry, Sir?"

"Sit!" he barked.

I quickly installed myself in a wooden, high-backed chair facing the desk, noting the leather straps hanging loosely from the back of it.

"Emily..." he read. "No last name. How quaint."

The Doctor's pattern of speech was thoughtful, almost premeditated, and oddly unemotional in tone, yet somehow entrancing. I sensed he was not waiting for an answer, and remained silent. He continued to read the document aloud.

"Attempted suicide by leaping into the Thames... Insane behaviour indeed, but not very original these days."

"I'm afraid I had not many options at the time, Sir."

He looked up at me and twisted his thin lips into a grin.

"Doctor, if you please. Doctor is superior to Sir."

Were he not so very inimical, I imagined he might have made a great politician, for his delivery of this untruth was almost convincing.

"I am sorry, Doctor, I was not aware of that."

"Weren't you? Never mind. I would prefer it if you were silent. Once again: Attempted suicide by leaping into the Thames, prior to which was physically violent towards Guardian, one Count de Rothsberg... Tell me, Emily, do you always aim your hostility so high?"

"I consider my target rather low in this instance, Doctor."

"Do you? Subsequent to rescue from drowning by fishing boat, stole valuable goods from London merchants. Intent to prostitute. Taken into police custody. Declaration of Insanity signed by both present Guardian (C de R) and previous Guardian, the Unfortunate Girl's Musical Conservatoire. There. I suppose you have something clever to add to this as well?"

"Indeed, Doctor. I assume by 'valuable goods' you are referring to the bit of bread I stole from a baker's cart. While I doubt that the bun was of irrecompensable value to the baker, I was starving, and so it was quite valuable to me, and I am not sorry. I had no intent to prostitute myself -- that claim is false, and the rest such obvious fiction that I care not to dispute them."

"You accuse the police of lying?"

"Would I be the first?"

"Tell me, Emily, with no last name...do you consider yourself mad?"

"I consider myself considered mad, and that is all that matters."

"Would it surprise you terribly to know that the Count de Rothsberg is one of the Asylum's most generous benefactors?"

"Nothing would surprise me terribly, Sir."

"Doctor."

"Doctor."

"Then I suppose you will not be surprised when I inform you that you have been committed to the Asylum for Wayward Victorian Girls for a stay of infinite length; there is not a soul who cares to petition for your release."

"Not at all, Doctor."

"And, as such a clever girl, you surely realize that it is entirely at my discretion whether you are ever to see daylight again or not. What is more, in the eyes of the law you are a common criminal, and in my eyes, you are less."

"A common criminal receives a trial, Doctor, and, if it pleases you, send me back to prison; I would gladly have remained there, as Madame Mournington was made quite aware of at the time."

"Do not speak of my mother, you filthy thing!" shouted the Doctor, having turned suddenly fierce and rising from his chair. He was terrifically tall, and I imagined that many thought him imposing, but I had learned to experience fear without actually being afraid, and I never took my eyes from his; I was determined that the Doctor should look away first, and he did. Turning round to a cabinet behind his desk, Dr. Stockill withdrew a small bottle of green liquid and shook a few drops onto his handkerchief. As he did so, I spied something glittering from deep within the open cabinet. I could not determine the nature of the article, but the elaborate design engraved upon its oblong surface piqued my curiosity. Having wiped his bloodless hands



With the handkerchief, the Doctor soon regained his calm.

"No...no, it would not please me to send you back to prison."

Here the Superintendent paused. He had gone to the window looking down upon the front courtyard far below; from that view he would be able to see all who came and went from the asylum.

"It would please me...if you would tell me something I have always wanted to know."

Dr. Stockill carefully folded the starched, white cloth; he had a way of moving his hands that reminded me of a lace maker...or a spider.

"I have never understood why someone would willingly choose to die. Can you tell me that?"

"In your own estimation, Doctor, to take one's own life is madness, in which case it is impossible to explain."

"I grant you this solitary moment in which to speak freely, and that is all you have to tell me?"

I chose my words carefully.

"I believe that suicide is most often committed in self-defense, Doctor."

There was a long silence, and when the Doctor again spoke, it was in his coolest, silvery monotone. He did not turn around, but remained facing the window.

"It's been very nice chatting with you. Do come again sometime."

Safe on the other side of the door, I closed my eyes and exhaled for the first time since entering Dr. Stockill's chamber. Then, my arm was seized and I saw that Madame Mournington had been waiting just outside the door for me all the time; she marched me briskly across the Medical floor and to the right towards the Bloodletting Wing. As we walked, I became aware of a faint but fetid odor -- the smell of decay. The stench was not before me; it had followed me like a ghostly vapor out of the Superintendent's chamber and down the hall.

Dr. Stockill smelt of death.

It's hard to tell someone that they shouldn't be defined by their illness. Or, rather, it's easy to tell someone, but it's hard to hear. It is impossible NOT to become defined by your illness, even to yourself, when everything you do is so closely intertwined with it. There is virtually NO part of your life that you live like other people do - even the smallest detail is adjusted in some way - a way very possibly imperceptible from the outside. And then there is always the question of what you ARE allowed to define yourself by, if not by something that affects you more than any other influence in your life. Manic Depression surrounds me as much as possible could. It is my skin, but it is my own skin. I still own my heart, which it also my blood. A hurts so much. I know because

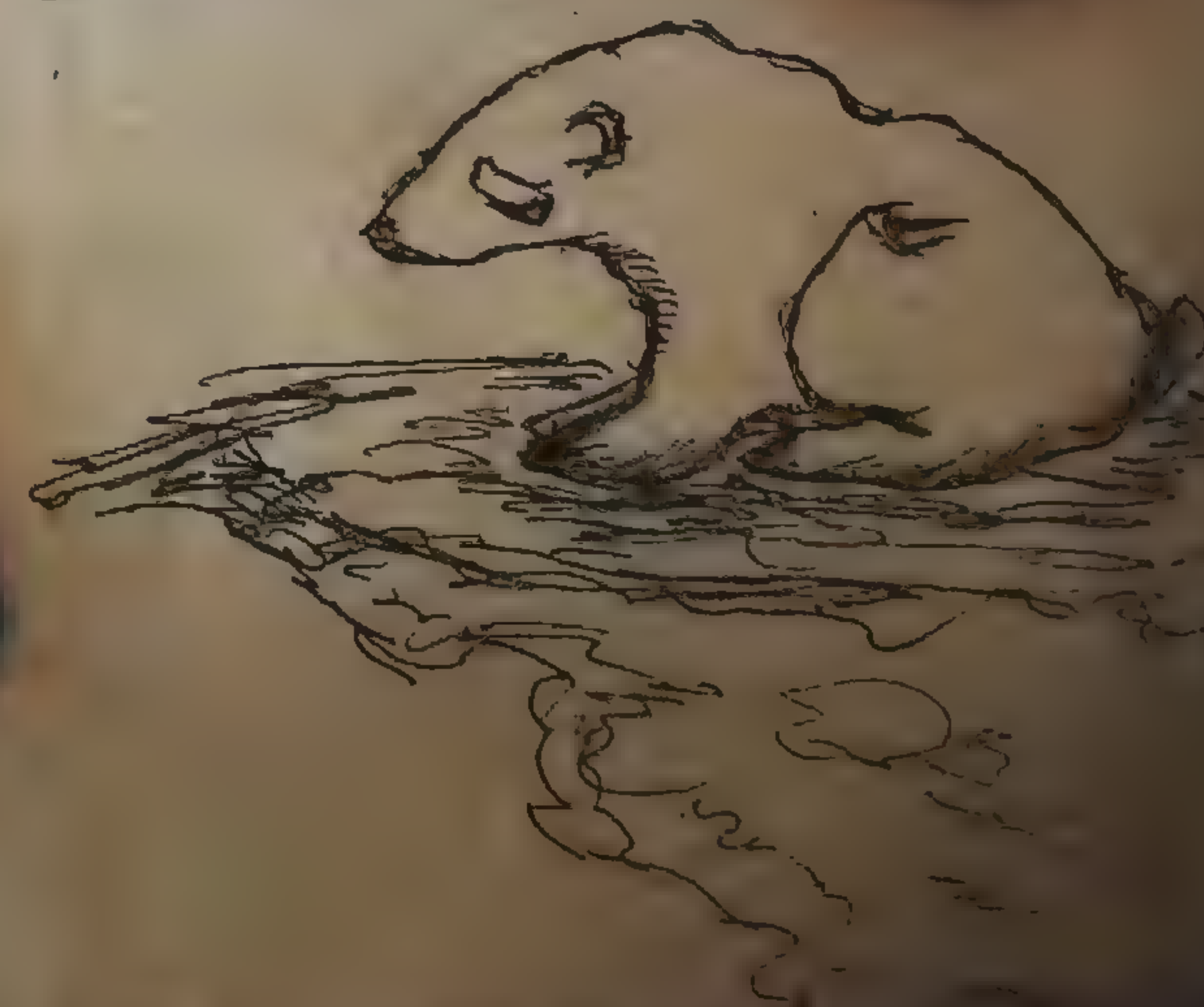
If I were to murder someone, I would not receive near this amount of revilement... perhaps this is because most anyone has been enough to imagine killing somebody. Or at least they might say, "Well, what did he do?"

But, with attempted suicide, there is no such desire to understand, no such sympathy, only anger and contempt. And disgust.

It must be innate. Genetic. Like the chicks who scatter when the shadow of a hawk passes overhead, though they've never seen one before, and could not have been taught to be afraid. Or how we react when we encounter snakes and spiders, even though we have little to no reason to actually fear them. Nobody has to teach us this - it's just there, and it has been for as long as we can remember. We are all creeped out by the same things. Perhaps that innate revulsion with suicide is how we know not to do it - how we know to BE rather than NOT to be. Maybe if we were more understanding of it we would be endangering our very species by doing a hole in the "THOU SHALT NOT KILL THYSELF" law. Maybe it's just not safe to accept suicide. And yet we are all told that we must accept death.

But we don't.

BIPOLAR BEAR





## Hospital Entry 14: WHAT VIOLET SAID

I am sitting alone on the shabby green couch in the Day Room as the other inmates are either maundering about on their own or sitting on the floor, rocking back and forth while watching random game shows on the ancient television set. I am taking advantage of this rare moment of relative privacy to write without having to look over my shoulder.

Violet walks in and comes to join me on the couch. I resent this. She doesn't look at me -- she never makes eye contact with anybody, and I wonder what it feels like inside that head of hers. She is staring straight ahead. I try to ignore her, and continue writing my pointless memoirs.

"They'll read that when you're asleep," Violet mutters.

"What did you say?"

"They'll read that when you're asleep," she repeats.

"My notebook? Is that what you mean?"

Violet does not respond.

"How do you know that, Violet?"

She stands up and shuffles away.

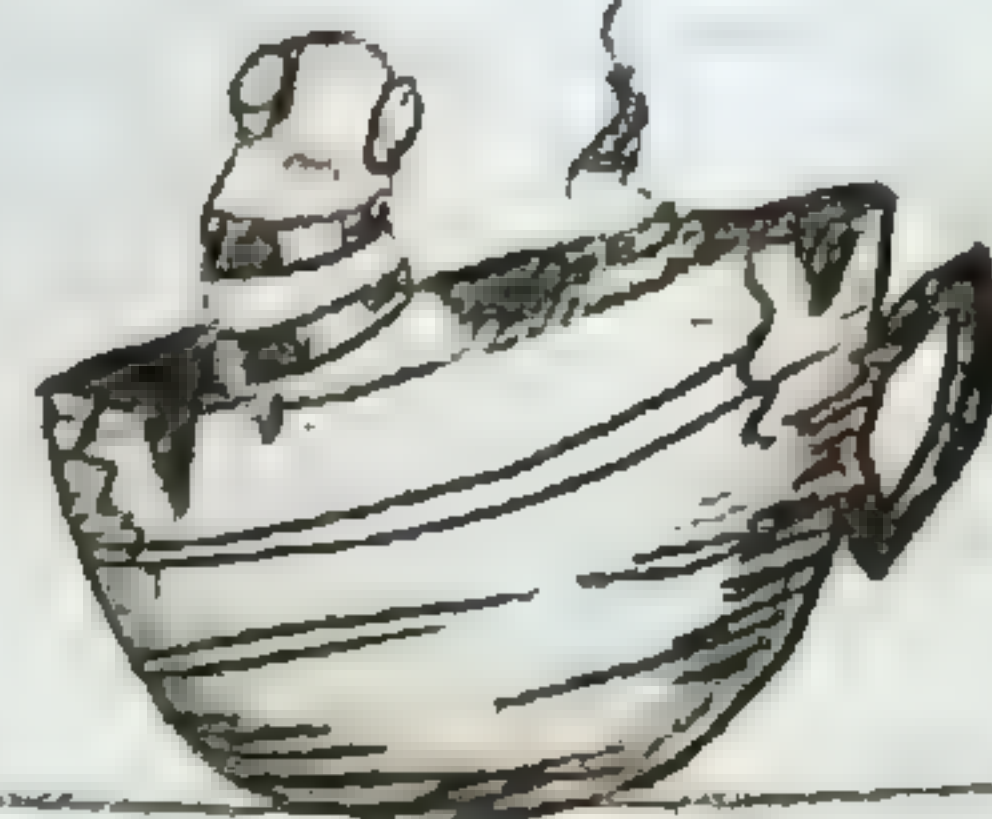
"Violet?" I call.

She doesn't hear me.

Suppose the staff does read my notebook when I turn it in at night? What happens between the moment I hand it to the nurse in the glass booth and the moment she places it in my closet compartment? Can they do that? Maybe they have to do it. Maybe that's why they let me have the notebook to begin with -- they're setting me up. I decide it might be a good idea to go back to the beginning of my notebook, back to my life (or, rather, my "existence") of months ago, before I was committed, before I began receiving my cryptic and still unexplained letters from Emily with a 'y', just to see what I wrote -- just to see how badly I have incriminated myself. I flip through the pages, trying to decipher my writing, the scrawled words telling my blackest secrets -- diaries within diaries within diaries...

It isn't pretty.

Death and I have been  
scandalously intimate  
for some time now.



## Asylum Letter No. VII

What luck that I should have been allowed the pleasure of an audience with both good Drs. Stockill and Lymer on the same day!

My turbulent encounter with the Bloodletting Wing was the perfect antidote to the positively funereal interview I had just arrived from. Madame Mournington dragged me towards a set of doors above which was nailed a bronze plaque engraved with this inviting title:

Dr. Francis Lymer: BLOODLETTING

The doors crashed open from within; two medical assistants emerged carrying between them a girl paler than death. Blood soaked her white shift, and her striped legs were limp as a rag doll's. The men fumbled and the girl was nearly dropped; how fortunate she was to be unconscious.

I stood staring down at the drops of blood that had spattered onto the polished floor, but my mistress had her pincers in my arm and pulled me forward.

"God help me...another sensitive one," she sighed.

I shall describe to you, Diary, the Bloodletting Wing: It is a vast, open room lined with row after row of metal beds on wheels. The beds are fitted with thick leather straps and rusty buckles. Upon the walls hang medical tools of a decidedly medieval appearance; upon entering, I was quite overwhelmed by the sheer variety of blades, needles, hammers, and other contraptions I did not recognize but could hardly envision approaching a human body, to say nothing of healing it.

"How extraordinary," I thought, "that a veritable host of diseases can be so easily cured by the draining of the patient's blood..."

In truth, Diary, it is a miracle! Headache? Too much blood. Melancholy? Impure blood. Misbehaving? Poison in the blood. Fainting from too much bleeding? Bleed some more. Any ailment, real or imagined, is subject to the same treatment, and, in a manner of thinking, I suppose it is ingenious: Bleed a girl to within an inch of her life, and she hasn't got the strength to cause trouble. Is this how a staff of thirty manages a thousand inmates? Well done, gentlemen.

Having been deposited inside the Bloodletting Wing, Dr. Lymer, a rather stout sort of man who was busy pounding a bladed chisel (which I have since learned is called a fleam) into the arm of another inmate, commanded me to wait in the corner of the room (over which was hung a sign painted with the word "LEECHING." Every bed in the wing was occupied save one near me in the Leeching corner; the empty bed was spotted with fresh blood, presumably having belonged to the girl who had been rushed from the wing unconscious mere moments ago.

I had first learned what a leech was on the day that the Headmistress of the Conservatoire had fallen ill. A doctor had arrived; he was a portly little character with a tall hat, a striped waistcoat, a monocle secured to his chest pocket by a golden chain, and a magnificently curled moustache. He had come bearing jars full of the creatures, and had taken particular delight in dangling them in front of Sachiko and myself, their wriggling bodies dripping with crimson. I was more repulsed by the man than by his insects, and found the entire process highly suspect from the start.

With his elaborately ornamented leech jars, clearly decorated to impress the patient



as I assumed the jar's tenants never knew the difference, and armed with cases of bottled remedies and brightly coloured pills, the Doctor seemed to me like a street-peddler or something out of a carnival, for he displayed none of the noble bearing I had expected would accompany a man of medicine. I had asked him from whence the leeches came.

"These slippery little bloodsuckers begin their lives in your lakes, your swamps -- that sort of place. Little boys and little girls, just like you, are sent bare-legged into the water, and there they wait for the leeches to bite into their flesh and hold tightly."

At this, Sachiko ran screaming from the room, but I was transfixed.

"When their legs are covered with the parasites," the Doctor continued, "the children, what we call 'leech-catchers,' are finally allowed to come out of the water. Then, after the leeches have had as much blood as they can drink, they fall right off wouldn't you know, and the leech-catchers go back into the swamp and do it all over again. Would you like to be a leech-catcher, little girl? You could make a penny a week, you could."

I shook my head. He had been trying to frighten me, and he had succeeded. The Doctor invited me to watch as he applied the leeches to the Headmistress's chest and throat; the Headmistress herself would never have permitted me to stay, but she had swooned in a fever, and the Headmaster was away -- he had gone to retrieve a new addition to the Conservatoire from some slum or other. The very worst of it was the way that the Doctor removed the leeches from the old woman's flesh by pouring salt over their delicate skins; he said he hadn't the time to wait for them to detach on their own as he had several more leechings to perform that day. The salted bodies recoiled and fell onto a very nice china saucer that the Doctor held below them; he had taken the saucer from beneath a teacup placed upon a nearby table -- an act I thought uncommonly rude. Horrified, I watched as the fallen leeches gushed forth every drop of the blood they had just sucked, and writhed in obvious agony as their skins dissolved. I could not sleep for days after.

Now, it was my turn. I was lifted onto the bed by a waiting attendant, that same giant who had first led me to the Asylum by a collar and leash; he now wore a heavy apron of rough leather stained with great red blotches. Before I could protest, Dr. Lymer's monstrous slave held me down by my shoulders. Nobody spoke to me; I was just another body filled with blood that must come out. A dirty glass jar was opened -- nothing like the polished, rose-pink vessel I had seen at the Conservatoire bearing the word "LEECHES" decoratively painted in gold leaf -- and the Doctor lifted out a single leech by its tail.

Naturally, I did not want the leech on my arm, not because I was afraid of it (though it was a good deal larger than I had expected, and I confess I was a little), but because of the gruesome demonstration I had witnessed back in the Conservatoire, and I knew that, once the leech's employment was up, the Doctor and his assistants would pour the salt over it, a bowl of which I had already spotted upon the stand beside the bed. They would kill it.

I began to scream, as loudly, as hysterically, as I could. I had convinced myself that I was fighting for the helpless leech's life, although, by the time Dr. Lymer located the desired vein (how he chooses one I'll never know), I really was not at all certain what I was screaming about anymore. In the center of the room stood a massive wooden table on top of which were piled towering heaps of specimen jars containing things both living, dead, and undecided, and littered with bloody rags as well as countless bottles of sanguinary fluid, each labeled with a different inmates's name. Dr. Lymer sent his assisting brute to retrieve a cracked porcelain bowl from this table, and I saw that it was already filled with blood -- someone else's blood.

Having selected a prominent blue vein on the inner part of my wrist, the Doctor dipped one of his fat fingers into the bowl and smeared the blood over the area, which I felt was a bit like cheating. When I continued to struggle, the giant strapped my limbs to the bed, pinning my bloody arm and tethering it beside my face. "I know what they're doing," I said to myself. "They are trying to break me by making me watch." Dr. Lymer approached me with the hapless creature, and I let loose one final bout of screaming, this time directing my outrage more towards the leech than towards the men.

"No, no, no!" I cried. "They'll kill you! They'll kill you, you idiot leech!"

Dr. Lymer nodded to his assistant, who then produced a stiff, yellowed rag and pressed it over my mouth. The leech was suspended over my wrist, perusing its inch of flesh and looking for the perfect spot to sink into. I turned my head away.

"You might feel a little pinch," I heard the Doctor say.

His voice seemed distant, as though the words were intended for someone else and not for me. Suddenly, I felt the strong desire to watch as the tiny teeth pierced my skin. Opening my eyes halfway, I saw the leech for the last time before I lost consciousness. As my vision blurred and my eyelids fluttered to a close, I had two distinct and peculiar visions: In the first, I saw a wolf with enormous fangs, clamping its jaws around my wrist and refusing to let go. As this vision solidified, so did the "little pinch," until it became the searing pain of shredding flesh. In the second, I saw a honeybee that, equipped from birth with the instrument of its own destruction, by following its natural instinct, buzzes willingly to its death. Oh! as I write these words, Diary, this paradox is still upon me: A leech tastes blood and then it dies. A bee stings only once. Are we, too, born harbouring that within us which can also annihilate us? They say I am mad because I attempted to take my own life, but, if I exercise my birthright and perhaps even fulfill my destiny, how can I be faulted? I am not behaving aberrantly -- self-destruction is completely natural.

No one dies of old age.







The Royal Victorian  
Bloodletting Society  
presents

# THE AMAZING LEECH

Did You Know

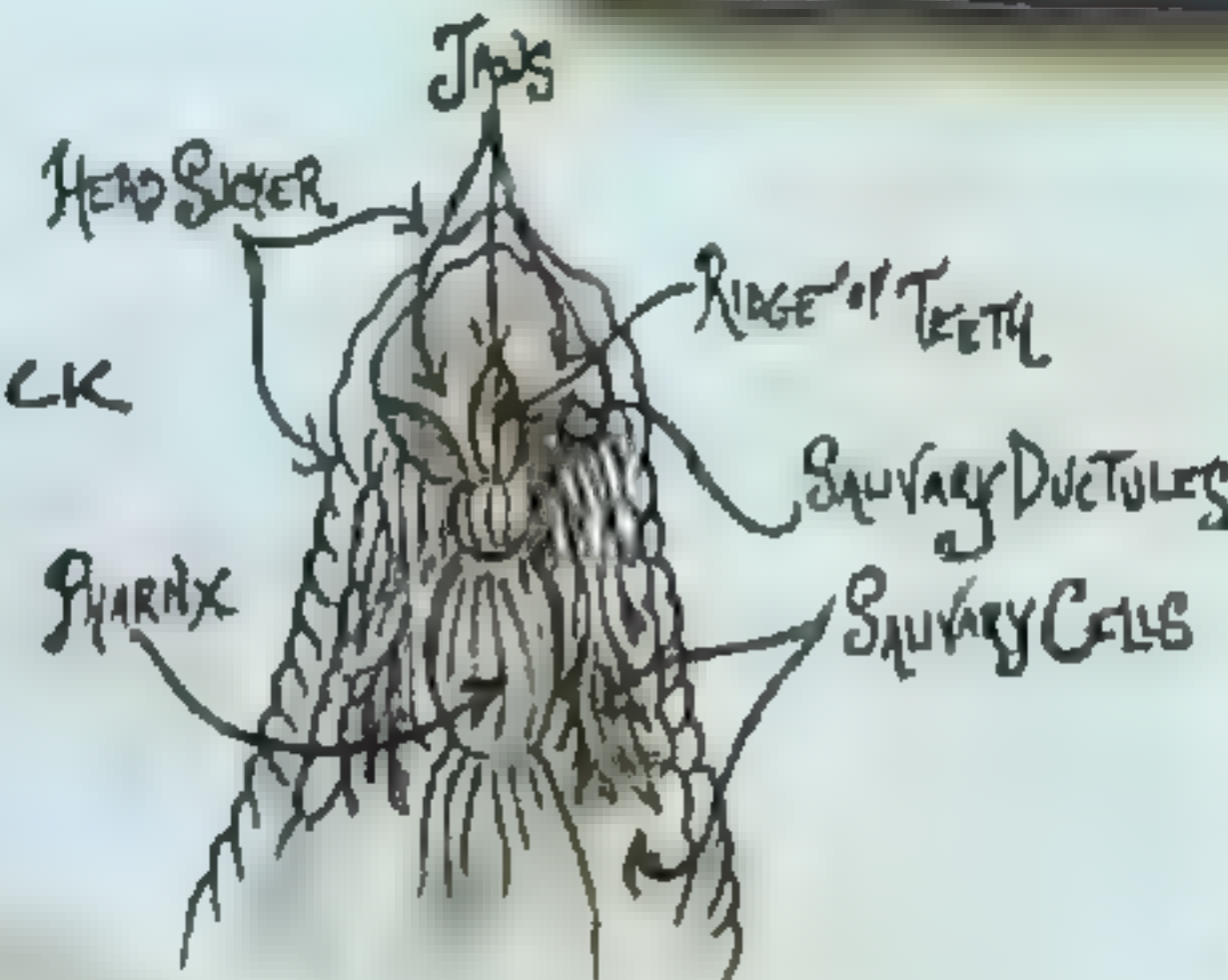
- LEECHES ARE NOCTURNAL (JUST LIKE RATS AND BIPOLAR GIRLS)
- THE LARGEST LEECH EVER DISCOVERED WAS 18 INCHES LONG(!)
- LEECHES HAVE 32 BRAINS
- THERE ARE 650 KNOWN SPECIES OF LEECHES
- THE HIRUDO LEECH HAS 3 JAWS WITH 100 TEETH ON EACH
- LEECHES CAN DRINK UP TO 5 TIMES THEIR BODY WEIGHT <sup>YOUR</sup> IN BLOOD
- A WOUND CAUSED BY A LEECH WILL BLEED UP TO 10 HOURS
- LEECHES HAVE SUCKERS ON BOTH ENDS OF THEIR BODIES
- LEECHES CAN CHANGE COLOURS DRAMATICALLY
- LEECHES ARE HERMAPHRODITES (BOTH MALE AND FEMALE SEX ORGANS)



A LEECH BITE LOOKS LIKE THIS:

FAQ: Q: Will leeches drink blood from each other?

A: YES! THE VICTIM OF THE ATTACK USUALLY DIES AFTERWARDS



THE LEECH: THE SEAMAN'S BEST FRIEND

LEECHES HAVE BEEN USED TO  
FORETELL UPCOMING STORMS.

IN 1850, GEORGE MERRYWEATHER DEVELOPED THE 'TEMPEST PROGNOSTICATOR'.  
LEECHES ARE INSERTED INTO GLASS TUBES PLACED AROUND A CAROUSEL.

THE TUBES ARE FILLED WITH AN INCH + A HALF OF RAINWATER.  
WHEN A STORM APPROACHETH, THE LEECHES RESPOND TO THE ELECTROMAGNETIC  
STATE OF THE ATMOSPHERE AND RISE TO THE TOP OF THE TUBE.

THERE, IT WILL TRIGGER A SMALL HAMMER WHICH STRIKES A BELL.

THIS ADVANCE KNOWLEDGE OF STORMS WAS VERY USEFUL TO SAILORS.

## Top Ten Leech Names

AS VOTED BY THE SOCIETY

1. SENATOR WRIGGLESWORTH
2. CORDELIA (AKA COCO)
3. MORTIMER
4. FLUFFY
5. WILLIE WANGLES
6. SNIVLES SHIVELS
7. SLIMERS
8. LORD EDGAR
9. GEORGE WASHINGTON
10. MR. WIGGLES

\* BONUS NAME: SUCKFACE

INSANITY and its CURE:

HOUSEWIVES! SEAMSTRESSES! MAIDSERVANTS!  
FEMALES, YOUNG ~AND~ OLD!  
**YOU ARE IN DANGER !!!**  
**MADNESS**

DOES NOT DISCRIMINATE!  
YOUR BLOOD IS FILLED WITH POISON! PURIFY IT NOW WITH:

LYMER'S

grows large for  
maximum blood loss!

FRESH!

simply salt  
and they fall  
right off!

has with more suction!

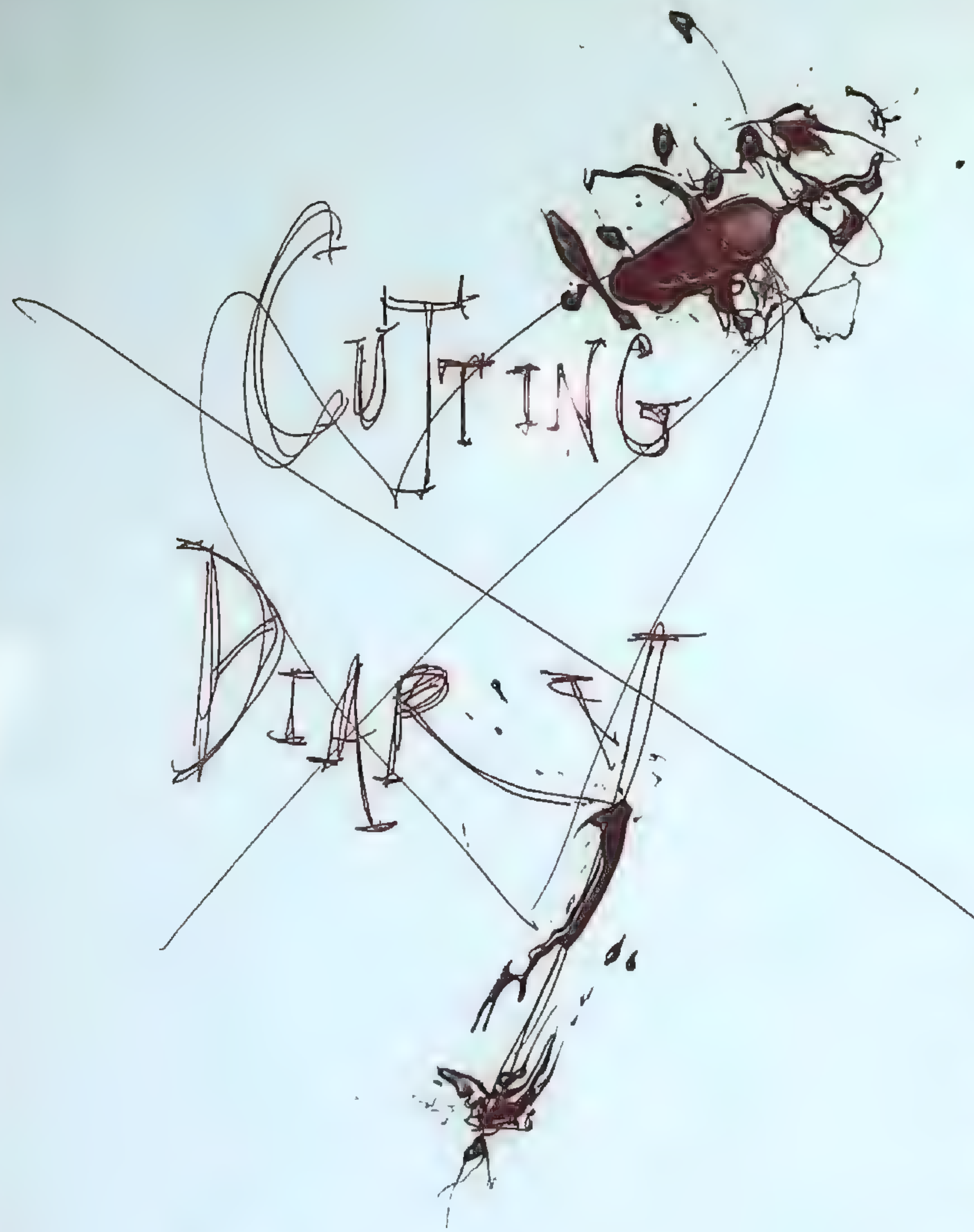
FUN!

so entertaining  
for the children!



LYMER'S LEECHES have NO equal! Superior to ALL others! Beware of Imitations!  
Send 14 to DR. LYMER'S BLOODLETTING SUPPLY for a free sample.





WHY AM I NOT ASHAMED?

I had always thought that cutting was something that angry teenage girls did for attention. That was before I began doing it.

It was strange how it all started... I was overcome by a sudden intense compulsion to take a knife to myself. I had never before felt this, nor could I ever have imagined feeling it. It came from within me, from some dark, primal place - there was no provocation.

Once the desire had come into me, I could not get the idea out of my mind. I was like an alcoholic who's never had a drink - I needed a fix of something I hadn't even tried yet.

The first time I gave in, I took apart a shaving razor... I was surprised at how easily it gave up its blades to me.

The moment I made that first fateful slice, I experienced the gratification I had anticipated, and more. I knew instantly, as I sat on the bathroom floor watching the blood rise to the surface of my thigh, that I had just gone down a path ~~as~~ I could never turn back from - a path that would change other's perception of me, as well as my perception of myself.

I was branded, and I was glad to be.

I had always been ashamed of being a manic depressive. What right have I, I thought, and still do think, to be depressed when there are people in this world who suffer so much worse in their lives than I?

~~Now~~ I was ashamed to have a disease that nobody could see, but now, I had proof. I had visible symptoms, and I wouldn't have to explain myself anymore.

I soon learned that I would spend my life defending myself instead.



I have been given the assignment of documenting not the details of my cutting, but rather, the emotions I experience during the actual cutting itself. This is an attempt on the part of my shrink to get me down off of the ceiling where I like to hang out and watch the goings on below without actually being a part of them. In fact, I don't like ~~be~~ being on the ceiling at all, but I can't not be.

So, Doctor, what can I say about cutting?

It feels... good.

It feels like... release.

It feels like... relief.

If I cannot breathe, and my heart, my soul is congested and suffocating, a small slice of my leg, a wee slit on the inner flesh of a thigh will give me that one more breath with which I can catch the next breath, with which I can catch the next one, until, soon, I'm breathing normally, or relatively so, and my focus is no longer on ME, or my pain, or my suffering, or, even worse — my confusion, but instead on the beautiful, beautiful, BEAUTIFUL droplets of blood that are rising slowly to the surface of the wounds I have only just made.

It's kind of like when I cry, but so much prettier. The rising, spilling crimson drops are my tears — so much easier to start than to stop. And that's just it. Cutting is just like crying — so much easier to start than to stop.

When I have had enough of gazing at the lustrous drops, so rich, so lovely, and becoming fuller every second — yes, when I feel that it would be almost lascivious to look anymore, I pour a drizzle of iodine onto the cut and it starts the blood spilling, pouring sometimes, and stinging as well. When I cry, when I have put forth that tremendous effort that is NOT crying and failed at it, I think of a million remedies, a million iodine fixes, antiseptic cleansings, all of which are supposed to stop my tears, sterilize me, and tape me neatly beneath white bandages until the next cry. Until the next 10 minutes from now.

You have left me covered in ugly wounds and that's ok, but a cut that I inflict myself isn't?

How is it that it is considered perfectly acceptable that I am harmed by a dozen outside forces, in a dozen ways, from above, from rape, from the mundane cruelties of life that affect us all, from brutal heartbreak, from violent lovers, from dishonest friends, and yet I have no right to harm, even superficially, myself?

Everything that is done to me from the outside — all of that I am advised and expected to "get over" and "forgive," and I can even pay a therapist hundreds of dollars an hour to teach me how to do this (there are a lot of people making money off of my pain). But I am not allowed to forgive myself, even if I wanted to, because no one will forgive me.



In comparison to all life's ills, a cut on my flesh — a cut that, unlike the other hurts we all receive, will heal relatively well — is nothing.  
Nothing.

It may leave a mark as it heals, but do not external happenings leave their marks as well? And often, in ~~many~~ many more mental and physical ways?

It does seem a bit backwards to me that I must treat myself as a precious object when nobody else does. Not the world, not lovers, not even friends. All have the power to cause still more pain, leave still deeper scars... and yet, I am the criminal. I am reminded of the prevailing notion of (female) celibacy until marriage — "your body is a 'precious gift,'" they say, to be kept safe and clean and pure until such time as your husband takes your "precious gift" and trashes it all at once, when he pleases, how he pleases.

Lie back and think of England, right?



I had another idea about cutting today that is sadly just outside the parameter of my mind just now... I feel as though, if I were to extend my hand just a little toward the pool where the ideas ferment, I could grab at the idea and pull it out of the pool and onto the floor where ideas must stand before the jury of the brain. There, it must present itself, still dripping from the pool, and a bit shivery because new ideas are not given a towel to dry off with, towels being reserved for proven theories; new ideas are simply pulled out

and stood up, and asked to explain themselves — not a very pleasant thing really, which is why so many people never go into the room where the pool is. The whole exercise is exhausting not to mention a bit difficult to watch if you are at all a sympathetic creature. What was my idea anyway?

It involved cutting, bruising (what's new?), something like that, and was most likely yet another attempt to excuse the inexcusable act on some grounds or other that I can no longer remember.

Ah! I believe it was about comparing the cutting of one's self to the itching of a scab or a mosquito bite, not with any intention to say that they are all of equal importance, but merely as a means of understanding what makes one do one, or, for that matter, the other. When one has a scab or a bite, one often has a rather difficult time not scratching it, because, in some way that we feel but cannot put into words that don't sound crazy, scratching feels GOOD! It's not about the itch — it may itch a little, but scabs don't really itch ALL that much, come on... we do it because it is pure, perverse pleasure to pick things off our bodies, because we are intrigued by the minor discomfort that comes with the act, because we see a little blood, and that gives us a little thrill, and don't you dare deny it because you know I'm bloody locking right.

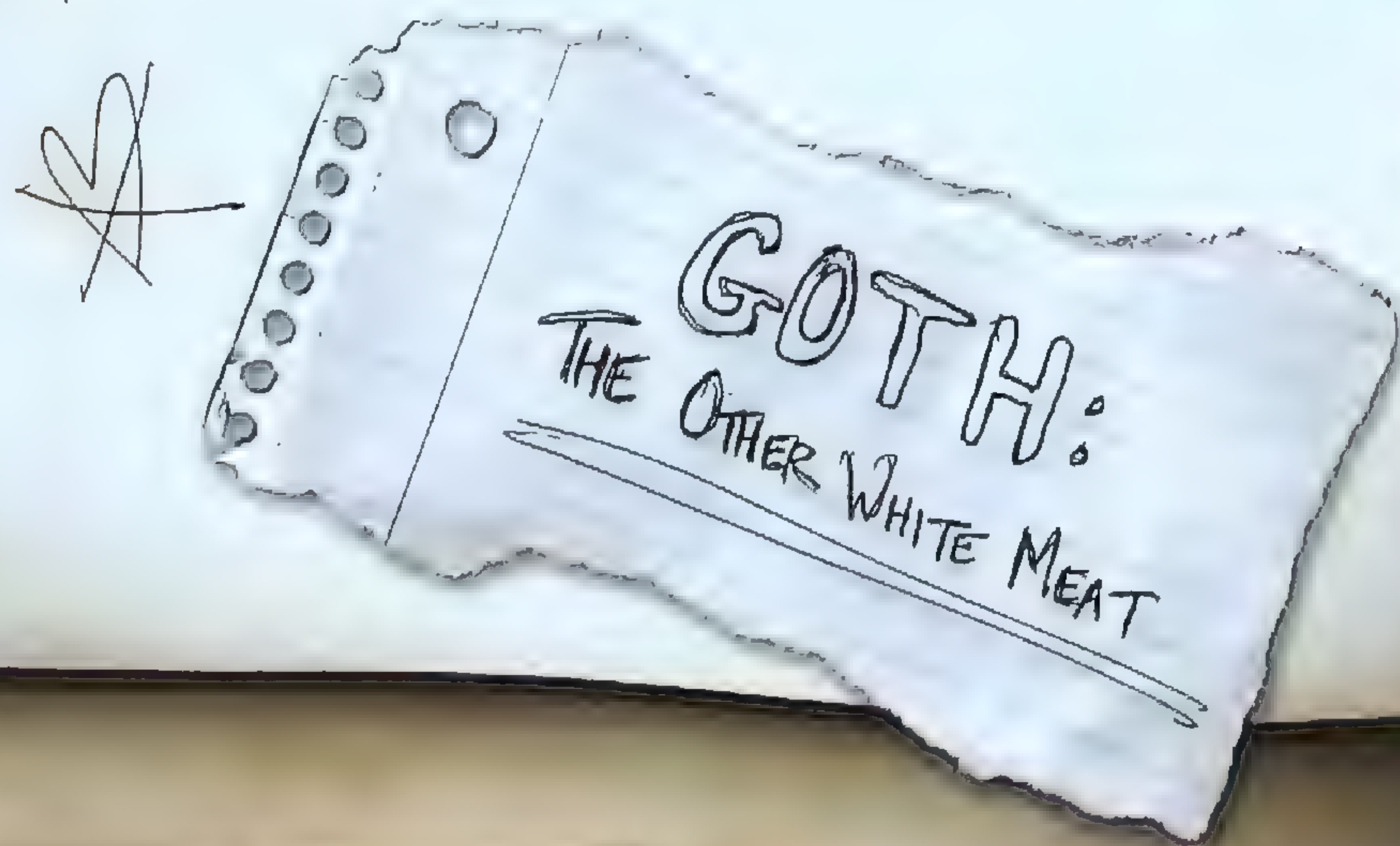
A child who skins his knee can keep this cycle of scabbing — picking — bleeding going on and on and on until his parents find out, and, after a sound scolding, tape a sterile pad over the afflicted area, which has become both wound and plaything. In every case except in that of the meek and most obedient child, which I never was and never wished to be, putting a sterile pad over a minor scratch serves nothing but to set any lively mind to the task of either getting the pad completely off, or, if he is a clever one (and in the other sort I have no interest), he will find a way, or rather, an instrument, with which to pick away at his scab without anyone even



suspecting for, after all, he was never doing it for anybody else anyway. At this point, all of these seemingly harmless, and often helpful events combine to create a secretive child with a desire to make his own flesh see his own blood, and a compulsive need to do so that only handkerchiefs ~~can~~ could deter.

There is not one, solitary reason why people ~~cut~~ cut themselves. In <sup>my</sup> personal case, I am driven by profound disappointment, and a broken heart full of broken dreams and a sense of lost control over even the most intimate parts of my body, and, oh yeah, I'm also a suicidal manic depressive. But there is also that element of entertainment, of wonder at the almost sensual pain during the cut, at the speed at which the blood rises to the surface, at that moment when you wait in breathless anticipation to see whether, when the blood does come, it will be in the form of ~~a~~ a thin red line, or will it actually spill out in droplets (my personal preference), and then still more wonder at how the wound bleeds even more as the iodine is applied, just as a hug from a friend when one is on the verge of tears sends one into floods of them. It's almost as though we wait to see that it's all going to be OK — that we are somewhere safe, with someone that we trust...

Why do I have this awful feeling that my words would <sup>only</sup> disgust others, and why do I have this awful desire to excuse my acts that disgust others so? I suppose that's why.



The truth is, girls are misled from the age of approximately 12 years old to see their own blood, and lots of it. We have all touched our own blood, because you can't do what girls need to do without coming into contact sometimes. I don't think I've ever smelled my own blood, but a lot of girls do. And the thing is, it becomes perfectly normal.

Please take a moment to explore the mind-numbing reality of just how much blood one girl not only bleeds, but sees during the course of her life, and that's not counting childbirth, my friends, which is on a whole other planet. I am hardly suggesting that this lifelong proximity to blood is any catalyst to begin cutting, and for the need to cut deeply and frequently. I simply believe that for friends, parents, doctors, all those around a cutter to behave as though she had committed a crime, a crime against herself, and a crime of the worst kind because it violates her body, her precious, precious body, is a bit ridiculous.

Most of the insults that I have personally received as a cutter have not been to do with how it may hurt me or what it says about how sad and desperate I must be, no, they have all been exclusively to do with how disgusting and perverse it is. And yeah, maybe coming from boys who have never suffered more than a scraped knee and are utterly unaware of what it really is to be badass, and who also no doubt look upon my body as something belonging to them, in which case I am also committing the crime of property damage, that makes a lot of sense. But it should perhaps be considered how very ~~much~~ much blood I have to see and have to feel pass through me for the endless months of my life before I am told that finding emotional release in seeing my own blood is so very perverse and shocking.



If anything is perverse, it is nature's demand that a girl should see so much blood in the first place, and quite against her will. And, what's more, this "precious" body, the very same that is hated and looked at, 'demeaned' both in daily life as well as in ever-existing form of media, harassed, molested, raped, and, if all that wasn't enough, is forever poked and prodded and weighed and constantly wrong for eating too much, eating too little, a million details which all point to the solitary girl, to every solitary girl, and say:

### DESTROY YOURSELF

So, if what I am doing is perverse, if my pain is perverse, my cutting is perverse, my suicidal thoughts are perverse, then the free world has truly become the loony bin (or wasn't it always?).

When the asylum is really an asylum then I shall go and live there for ever and ever.



I have received the shocking news that J--- has thrown away my makeshift version of a Leech Jar, my cutting kit. I had already looked through the bags she had returned to me and found the kit missing, and I knew what she had done immediately. I dreaded the question, but when I finally asked J--- outright, my disappointment was confirmed.

J--- had tossed my kit immediately after I left her house as a "symbol of hope" that I was over the "phase." How offensive that she thought that she should be the one to decide when the

"phase" was over? It seems to me rather like the way that S--- felt it was his place to tell me how to deal, or, rather, how not to deal, with my becoming unexpectedly pregnant, and with my subsequent abortion.

Anyway, my kit is gone, and, stupidly, J--- wrote that she would send me some money to replace it if it was that important to me. The fact is that the kit means everything to me right now; it contained my best razors (the ones that cut clean and deep), and all of my accoutrements for sanitation post-slice. I have been really, really careful to do this right. I am a perfectionist in this as in all things. I was being clean, sterilizing everything, protecting myself against infection because, again, I am not cutting to fucking kill myself. I am doing it so that I can get away from this constant drive toward suicide. So, was it really a good idea to take away my one coping mechanism at the time when I so obviously needed it most? Take my kit and I'll take the first sharp object I can find and do what I have to do, and it's not going to be smart, or clean, or anything, or maybe I'll just go the whole way and slit my throat with a butter knife while I'm at it because I've been made to feel utterly powerless.

You do not throw away someone's cutting kit with the expectation that it will deter them from cutting. You've only filled them with anger to get their control back, which is really what cutting is all about.

Even my doctor doesn't tell me to stop - he doesn't dictate, and he doesn't ask for empty promises, because he has enough common sense to know that it simply doesn't work that way. If I stop, which I hope to god I can do someday if for no other reason than that I don't like having to rely upon anything - I've never done a drug in my life - I've never smoked. I'm fond of alcohol just as much as anybody else, but not more, and I wouldn't care if I never had it again - I'd have a much more difficult time living without tea to be perfectly honest.



But back to J---, I have learned today that my control over my non-illegal actions (because suicide is illegal, but paper cuts ain't), and my rights over my non-illegal personal belongings are nothing in comparison to the importance of some naïve morons desire to sleep well at night. Of course, I'm the real dumbfuck here, because I shared a confidence, and I will most assuredly never make that mistake again. Everybody knows that if you're a girl, you've got to pull some fucked-up shit to piss me off, but this bitch better watch her back.

I won't dignify J---'s insulting offer to send compensation for the replacing of my stolen items with an answer because the most important thing inside that kit was the one thing I can't replace, not for any amount of money - the scraps of paper that I had been using to press against my cuts after making them. The papers were a record to me - not of every cut, as in a list or a number, but of this peculiar time in my life, in my disease, in me, that is calling for such desperate measures. I had hoped to glance over the scraps at some much later time, when I would no longer be doing the deed. There was also some perversity in me that felt that the bloodstained papers were beautiful, and I don't apologize for that.

Opinions on fine art aside, the papers were mine; I want those papers more than anything; I want them to the point that I could seriously consider repeating my cuts in their original order, on top of the healing scars they have become, to forge those records anew. I would know they were not the originals, and, yes, that would tarnish them in my eyes just a little. But it would be better than no record at all, because, in truth, I am disappointed at how quickly my scars are fading. The scars that you can still see in every photograph, even from faraway, are only the ones I made first, when I didn't know what I was doing. I hadn't yet figured out that an X-acto knife was not really the best tool, and I hadn't yet gauged how deep was too deep. But the others, the well-executed cuts, were fading. The crossed heart carved into my chest, the words etched into my thighs... I had made them because I wanted them. They were a message to me, and, though I had never set out to display them, I made them in particularly intimate places on my body

that would only be known to the next person I allowed to close in a moment of forgetfulness at how bad this always turns out. I wanted that person to know, before it was too late, that I was crazy and scary and should be backed away from immediately. I didn't want to have to talk about it anymore.

On second thought, I think I could never repeat my fading cuts just to get my bloody paper scraps back, because getting to the point of cutting ~~the~~ and then executing the act itself, is, for me, all about truth - absolute truth, truth beyond words, and truth where there is literally no other option, but truth. I have lived to the point where cutting myself or then watching myself bleed is the only true thing I can do. That is either horribly sad, or something to be almost proud of, because there are, I think, some people who never reach this point of truth. So, keep on living the lie, people, and maintain your perfect flesh, just like I used to have.

Furiously writing to J--- of my wrenching disappointment in her monstrously irresponsible actions, she replied, in her superior way, that the trash bag she had thrown my treasures into might still be on the premises somewhere. Even as I envisioned my former friend digging in a dumpster for my razor blades, my heart skipped in a hopeful rhythm because I may, just may, see what J--- termed "a bunch of bloody tissues" again. And, if I do receive them, I shall make certain that my "bloody tissues" will become a terribly meaningful and hopelessly self-indulgent artwork, and, also, I shall celebrate by re-cutting the crossed heart on my left breast with a little more force this time... it's barely a mark, barely a scar, barely worth doing. No, if I'm going to cut myself at all, I want to give myself something I can potentially regret. Because why? Because to regret the decisions I have made in regards to my external body may distract me from regretting the decisions I have made in regards to my internal one.

I did not get my kit back.





Last night, after re-carving the crossed heart into my chest with a newly acquired razor blade, I had put on a tank that could technically show just the top of the cut, but wouldn't if only I were to pull it up slightly, which I did. This worked well enough until both S— and I were sitting on the floor, perched over a new guitar FX board. I had not realized that I was sitting at such a compromising angle.

"Did you cut yourself on your chest there?" he asked.

"Yes."

"When did you do that?"

"A couple of days ago."

This was, of course, a lie, as I had made the cut only a bit earlier that day, but these are the days when lies are the only thing keeping us going — he lies that he cares about me, and I lie that his apathy doesn't hurt me.

"That's really disappointing," he said, after heaving a pained sigh. "Does your doctor know?"

"Yes."

Again, I am the dog who's been bad, and so we go on and ignore it in that peculiar way that has always been so natural to him and so unfathomable to me.



Practicing my violin tonight (warming up my fingers for a little jam session I've been called in to have with Steve Vai tomorrow morning that I am looking forward to, but so jacked up on drugs, amnesia drug in particular, that I cannot imagine how I could possibly remember how to walk let alone play intelligently) I felt the need to cut again. In analyzing my emotions (my doctor assignment), I found that they were far from simple, and, therefore, that much harder to cure. There was the indignation at S— looking at me with disappointment, and speaking to me with such unmasked disgust and disrespect. There was still more indignation that I had seen fit to throw away my cutting kit, because that only makes me want/need to cut even more, to really scar my body as a show of ownership if nothing else. And then there was the simple fact that the lines on my legs were fading, whether or not they would scar was yet unknown, and I still had the desire to keep my skin in a constantly torn and bloody state. Healing is not what I wanted to see. I wasn't ready for healing. The only good thing about healing was that it proved that I had managed to cut myself without becoming infected. I would simply have to do more so that I could ensure more scars — so that I could feel my secret under my clothes — so that I would know that anyone who ever got close enough to see that secret would be afraid and run away forever, and that was good. That was what I wanted.

Then, I looked down at the word SUFFER engraved upon my <sup>right</sup> inner thigh, and thought, how sad, how paltry, it looks as though I hadn't even meant it at all. It was healing quickly, and was already nearly invisible in some places. This just won't do, thought I. So, I took up my razor and lifted my left thigh, getting close to that white expanse of tempting flesh almost completely marked with



train tracks.

I placed my blade in preparation for the "S" cut, deciding just how big I'd like for the letter to be. I decided that it should be rather large, and, also, I was expanding my technique as I had found myself attempting curves instead of only straight lines. I knew this would require an extremely sharp razor. I hoped mine would do... I made the complete "S", and it is a large, uniform, shapely letter. I was delighted by the drops of dark blood rising to the surface like air bubbles coming through the underside of a raw pancake. Proud of myself, I moved onto the "U" — easy, of course. Then, the first "F" which I cut so deep and which was bleeding so profusely that I had no choice but to stop after that and make my ceremonial pressings with a bit of tissue. This is just like the Rorschach Test, I thought. The design was mottled with beautiful, organic lines. Cutting the "S-U-F" was the one part of the day that was truly just for me.



And I cut again. The blood was repressed, and would otherwise, without my kind intervention, have been hidden forever, heavily buried beneath layers of restrictive and unfair skin... the blood is out now, and it says, "Thank you."

My god, it was so beautiful... what a color blood is, really... blood is brighter than any red you will ever see anywhere else in the fucking world — brighter because it is lit from the inside with the light of life. Don't you see? I am doing this to remember that I am alive! It is a tiny glimpse into the awesome, wondrous machines that we are, but we never really see it for ourselves, never really see the inside... maybe if we did, we'd have a lot higher self-esteem, because we positively glow.

I wanted to touch it, smear it around my chest, something I had never done before and had never imagined wanting to do, and it was only a few moments later that I did. I smeared the blood, marveling at how the color spread under my fingers, and, finally, I flicked my tongue over my blood-tipped forefinger. I had never wanted to do such a thing before, but it felt somehow inevitable. I was a bit disappointed to find that the blood tasted like nothing (but then so does hydrogen peroxide). The life force, the magical serum, the only thing that keeps me on this earth rather than someplace I'd rather be, tastes like... nothing. Silly that I should expect it to — what could it possibly taste like, and to what purpose?

I looked at my newly carved logo in the mirror. It was my logo... god, how self-indulgent, I thought, but whom should I indulge if not myself? I reminded myself that my logo did not start out as a logo, but merely a design I began using during a particular era of my life when I needed to use it, and the fact that thousands are now aware of that logo doesn't take away what it originally meant to me.

It is a battle scar. "I have a heart to break" is all it means. "I am killable." It doesn't mean "down with love" or "I hate my boyfriend" or any other silly, stupid sentiment. It simply means that I have that within me that can also destroy me. I learned this in the hardest way. I am not special. I am not polished, or strong, or protected in any way. I spent most of my life thinking that I was immune, and it wasn't until I died that I realized I wasn't. I won't forget that again. When I paint it on my face every morning, it is the battle scar that reminds me both of my beating heart and of its fragility, and of how very raw I am. Besides, looking at the <sup>fresh</sup> wound on my chest, the criss-cross heart, you may think I had tried, quite literally, to cut out my heart. And maybe I did.





I cut myself so deeply two days ago that I haven't been able to cut since. I had no idea how much I would miss sitting on the bathroom floor, half naked, humming to tear the roll of medical tape and cover the wounds that my trembling hands had just made, trying to be quiet about it in case anyone were to walk by.

I have used my knowledge of French bread baking and applied it to my thighs. When I was 12, I would often walk right off the campus grounds of my ultra-private and oh-so-prestigious music camp for child prodigies, and all the way into town to hang around the gourmet shop which dabbled as a cooking school. I had been passionate about cooking since age four, and was the only kid weird enough to subscribe to both *Gourmet Magazine* and *Bon Appetit*. I had dreams of being a professional pastry chef, and practiced by throwing grand parties and receptions after all of my concerts. ~~That summer of~~ That summer of my 12th year was when I discovered Martha Stewart, by the way, because the other place I would sneak away to was the public library, where I would spend hours with my nose buried in a cookbook, performing the recipes in my mind like a concerto, then calculating the results and even adjusting the ingredients to make variations that I would try out when I could. Everybody knows who Martha Stewart is now, of course, but guess who knew her first, people? Guess who owned every cookbook from "Hors d'Oeuvres" right on up to "Entertaining," before she ever had a show or a trial or people mocking her because they were afraid of how powerful she had become? Who? That's right, me.

All right, I got a bit off track there. I'm just protective about Martha, you all know that, and yeah, I'm talking to you, Notebook.

Back to camp: At any chance I could find, I would run to the shop and take

my place at the long table where a dozen middle-aged housewives and I would be taught to make chocolate truffles and other delicacies we might use to impress at the next business dinner. One lucky afternoon, I came in to the shop to find that the lesson of the day was to be French Bread. Now, any sort of yeast bread and pastries in general were my particular passions to create. I had made bread a million times before, but who cared? It was great! We all got our own balls of dough to knead and shape, and this brings me now, finally, to the point of my story — the slice.

After we had all achieved varying degrees of success in dough rolling and shaping, it was time to prepare our dough balls for baking in the smooth brick oven, directly on the hot stones, the old-fashioned way.

One by one, the women were called up to the front of the class and given one of the random dough balls (they had been taken from us and mixed up, which seemed to me very unfair to do after we had bonded with our dough and given it names). We were supposed to quickly shape the dough into an elongated baguette shape, and then we were given a razor blade and told to ~~make~~ <sup>make</sup> one long slash down the length of the baguette, creating the signature crusty gash of a well-made loaf. I'd be lying if I said it wasn't nervous.

Awaiting my turn to go up and make my slit was just like preparing for a performance, but one I was not as practiced in as I am used to being when I take a stage. Here I was, a minimum of thirty years younger than anyone in the room. The teacher didn't mind me, but the other students resented my being there.

I didn't blame them; I had walked into their territory and used it as my escapist playground because I wanted to be as far away from my music teacher as possible, but what they didn't know was that I needed this sanctuary even more than they did. I didn't ask for their friendship —



all I asked was that they should not laugh at me when I took the razor and made a fool of myself. Finally, my name was called, and there was nothing I could do anymore but hide my terror and put on the brave face that had gotten me accepted to the pretentious music school I was running away from.

I walk up to the front of the room. Above the cooking stations are 3 great hanging mirrors so that the students can see everything that is going on. Damn, I thought, I can't hide this from anybody — I make a bad cut, and everybody will see it.

I had the ball of dough in my hand. I stretched it easily into the prerequisite shape and size. There it sat — clean, smooth, white, alive, but resting, waiting to be sliced so that it can graduate to becoming one of humanity's miracles: Bread. The instructor put a razor blade into my hand as though it was something I ought to be handling every day, but I was terrified, and tried to find a way I could hold the razor without actually slicing off two of my fingers in the process. That would be cause for some explanation when I got back to school. And then, that part of me that I have learned to call my "fight or flight" mechanism snapped into place as it had so many times since, and I tightened my fingers around the blade, stretched my arm up to the top of the Daguette, and made a quick, clean, perfect cut along the length of the loaf, the dough blooming in response like a sea urchin you've just poked your finger into. I said nothing, transfixed as I was by the fact that I had just used a razor blade for the first time.

Then, the little room, that theatre of baking, erupted into sincere applause, and the instructor bellowed, "Perfect! She's a master!" And I stood there in absolute shock at the whole episode until she nudged me and said, "Why are you just standing there? Get that baby in the oven!" I got down off the stool

that had been put up for me so that I could reach my dough, and I carried the large wooden paddle ~~over~~ bearing my "perfectly" slit dough over to the brick oven. One little push and the dough was off the paddle and on its way to being the proud partner of a piece of brie.

Walking shakily back to my place at the bench, I looked up into the mirrors and saw the lady after me attempting her slice with the same razor, and butchering the poor pile of dough before her with several failed cuts. Most of the others had done the same, making ~~the~~ ragged, painful cuts that lacked elegance and caused the loaf to change shape.

Well, here I am, a million miles, a million people, a million worlds away from my little baguette, and yet, it is all I can think of when my bare thigh is stretched before me, and I've got the razor blade in my hand... I picture myself standing there with the blade, making that powerful slice without even thinking, then stepping back to a beautiful sight and the gasp of awe and then, finally, the applause. I had pictured that moment the first time I cut myself, and have every single time afterwards. I live that moment a lot lately, as evidenced by the ever increasing degree of difficulty with which I am finding a bare patch of skin to slice... it's almost gone. I've taken up nearly all the valuable acreage that would be mostly hidden from view by, well, really anyone except my abductor at this point. But, reliving that old cut, that moment, that gasp of stunned success, the same ~~same~~ gasp that fake mothers make in fake movies when their fake daughters walk down the fake stairs in their fake wedding dresses for the fake first time, that is what keeps me on my real floor in my real underwear with my very real razor blade looking for just one more bit of real flesh so that I can really slice it, so that I can really bleed, so that I can breathe.



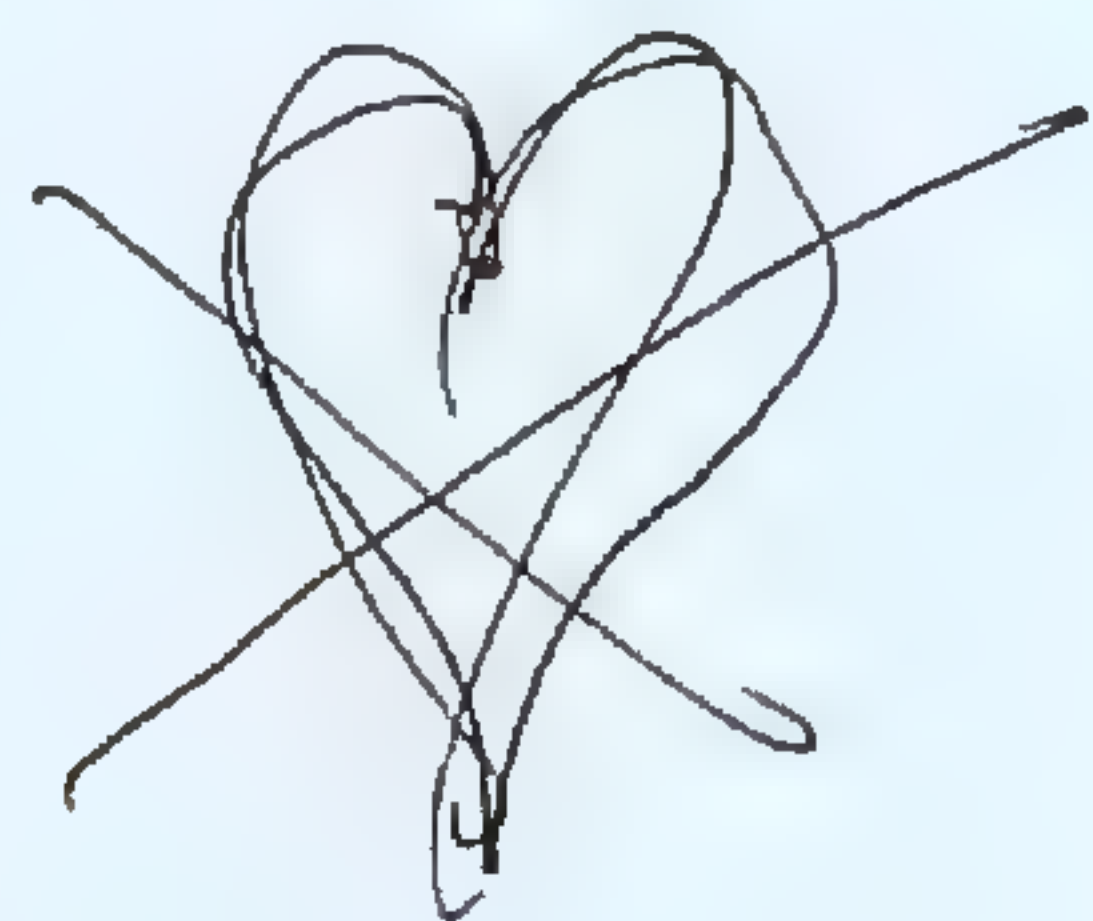
Last night I was sitting on the couch and I dozed off.

When I woke up perhaps 5 minutes later, I looked down into my hands and saw that they were full of short hairs. I felt my eyebrows, or rather, I felt where my eyebrows ought to be, for they were gone. ~~What?~~

This is not the first time I had done this, but it was the first time that I had pulled out all my eyebrow hairs - usually I could stop myself halfway. I feel like a bird pulling out my feathers, and I don't know why. Does this have a name?

I recall sitting through classical recitals when I was small and pulling out my eyelashes. Even then I knew it was an odd thing to do, but I simply couldn't stop - there was something incredibly satisfying in the act.

This is one behaviour I have no explanation for.



I realize that, while chemicals are the modern and more socially acceptable method of treating my mental illness (a.k.a. madness as it would have been called at any other time but now), what I have taken upon myself to do on my own has been much more medically prescribed for much historically longer, by which I mean, of course, bleeding.



Symptom





Only today was I looking through pictures of beautiful old leech jars and woodcuts of George Washington and friends being bled to death by either leeches or razors, having their life force sucked out slowly by an animal that at least appreciated it, or simply sliced up and drained into a bowl. And then I looked down at my legs, now shined and marked and welled, bandages peeling off because there are not enough bandages in the world to hold my flesh together, and I said to myself, "And what exactly is wrong with my way of doing things? It makes just as much sense as any other method of madness-releasing does, and I'm obviously not the only one who thinks so, so don't look at my method of self-treatment and call it a symptom of madness, because it was also your cure yesterday."

Bleeding is feeding. Slice is nice. Who the hell am I yelling at anyway? The dog is the only one here and I doubt he gives a fuck whether I slice my legs open or not. He probably thinks that's just as weird as taking a handful of prescription medication twice a day, 'cause he knows those aren't food.



So, what happens when cutting becomes more interesting than other activities.

I had not thought myself so in love with my razorblade that I could not go without seeing it for a day. But yesterday, both my need and my method changed.

I was at a wedding for a couple I had never met, because that's what good girlfriends do, and I had left my new cutting kit at home, not anticipating any time to devote to the use of it, and hoping that I would not need it. I had not yet experienced the pangs of undeniable craving to cut while out in public, unless you count the public bathroom at S-bucks. But, sitting in the pew during the service, something in my head told me to unclasp a safety pin that was holding a bit of lace onto my coat. With open safety pin in hand, I began to press the point to my wrist, not necessarily with any intention of breaking ground right then and there, but just to assess the probabilities of such an occurrence if needed in the near future. My partner sitting at my right noticed the pin, and took it silently away from me. He cast me that disappointed glance, and all my thoughts of bloodletting were gone. I wasn't going to do it ~~just~~ just to spite anybody. Was I?

Well, a visit to the ~~lady's~~ lady's room shortly afterwards ~~caused~~ caused me to question that last ~~the~~ statement, while giving me a whole new respect for the safety pin as a weapon. I pulled down my stockings, took from my coat another safety pin, and scratched a good four inches down my left thigh. It provided a nice sting, but not much to write home about in the.



quest for instant blood. I felt more powerful here in the bathroom than out side sitting with a man who was my boyfriend but not my friend, and making drunken small talk because when he is drunk is the only time he is half way nice to me anymore. I took the safety pin and began to scratch long parallel marks next to my first until I had 8 of them. Realizing my imperfect instrument, I tried to make each scratch just a bit deeper than the last, just a bit more like a real cut, without the unimpressive rosy welts, without the burn of torn, but not cut, skin.

I knew I could only be gone for a short while, and there were other wedding guests who needed to use the facilities anyway, though most likely not for the same purpose, so I tried to make the cuts quickly. I began to look the sensation regardless of the rough tool, and, by the time I stood up to go back to my place at the reception dinner table, I had 8 long red gashes marking my one pretty left thigh to match my one pretty right one, and they were bleeding through my stockings and beginning to show through my thin ice-blue engine gown. And all before cake!



What an awful series of choices have I made to result in the condition I am now in? Oh, the list is not within my mental strength to recall just now, but suffice it to say that an hour does not go by that my mind is not filled with a jumble of them, all crowding for space, and the result is a constant feeling of being stabbed in the chest with a dull dagger that I myself wrought, and the blade just let there, as though it was afraid of rusting.

The only other time I have experienced this particular breed of sorrow and desolation and continued, unrelenting pain was when I still lived with C.

And had to go through every day to being and suffering quietly and pressing the pain down and down and down and down and down and down until I could walk about as normally as you please, held breath and a terrified smile on my face... until one kind word from anyone was enough to bring ~~tears~~ torrents of tears... and that is just the difference. This time, there is no kind word ~~that~~ that can bring ~~the~~ tears because there is no one here. I am alone in my mind, alone in this house, the guest of a man who does not exist. His shell, which is in the same room as I am for at least half of every day, only gives me pain because I must turn myself into a similar shell if only to not disturb the pre-existing shell, the shadow of the ghost of the remembrance that was the man I was once so horribly, horribly fond of. He has deserted me and left in his place some sort of emotional policeman who serves to keep all that is human in me in check - Where can I go to erupt into very appropriate tears without being scolded and judged and punished for it? I like to use the S-bucks bathroom for this.





I am in complete awareness of the reality that I began my career as a cutter as an alternative to crying. I have known this for some time now. It was first proven by the realization that I had not cried during my last month-long cutting episode. No, in THIS house, under THESE conditions, I did not cry. And why? Because, when I felt hurt or angry or unbearably sad, I could just lock myself in the bathroom and calmly focus ~~my~~ my emotions into something cold and clinical, something exacting, and where there are things to think of like disinfecting and bandaging and such, and I could take the awful, sickening pain and focus it into a mark on my own body, taking relief in the sting, relief in the blood, relief in the making of the wound, and then in the cleansing of the wound, and then in the bandaging of the wound, such that I could emerge from the bathroom with a blank and collected sense of calm that enabled me to face to coldness of what awaited me outside the bathroom door. I had taken the pain, retreated with it to a safe place, dealt with it in my own way, even sanitize the grounds and bandaged the evidence, essentially taking CARE of myself. I suppose I couldn't CARE for myself unless I HURT myself first... stupid, yet logical I suppose.

Of course, I am aware also that, toward the end of my last cutting spree, I took on some additional reasons for doing what I was doing, and these I will mention at a later time if I have not already mentioned them earlier, which frankly I do not know whether I have or not because there are a million and one things that I do not remember, which is just why I am now suffering this withdrawal — to end that condition of chronic, daily memory loss. I am advised strongly to continue using the "Amnesia Drug" but I cannot. I could lose everything.

In any case! Here I am, honoring house rules (because, as it turns out, cutting myself for any reason is seen as both repulsive and despicable, and all the more so if I dare to do it on these premises, the home I have known for a year now) and, lo! The tears come rushing back because I am not cutting right now to keep them away and so I am left with no defense except secrecy. I cannot say that I am crying, and, if I do, I certainly can't say why. Yet, I cannot do the one thing that has succeeded in relieving the tears...

I cut myself because you wouldn't let me cry. I cried because you wouldn't let me speak. I spoke because you wouldn't let me shine. I shone because I thought you loved me...

And so I go to another room to be alone and shed my tears upon the pages of this journal that has become my only friend. Even the dog I must close my heart to just a little, because I know that I will leave him soon, and I will feel the loss of that silly, funny friend quite as acutely as I would the loss of any two-legged one.

I have promised not to cut myself in S. —'s house. Fair enough. I have managed to keep my word, and I am too drugged out to go anywhere else, so that means I don't cut at all, which is a good thing I suppose. Perhaps I am over the "peak"... that would be nice. This was never supposed to be a way of



life... it was about survival.

Isn't it strange how the only things I don't feel guilty about are the  
very things everyone else has put me on trial for?

I knew that what I was doing was madness in all eyes but mine, yet I wasn't shy about it at all. I hadn't done it to show off to people, or to hide. My fault was that my sense of self-worth, or lack thereof depending upon where you're standing, was not tied up into my physical appearance, especially not in my legs or my chest. In my drugged state, I couldn't remember to make everyone around me comfortable first, and, for once in my life, I didn't care. I wore the same clothes I always did (short shorts, fishnets), and it didn't occur to me that, because they could see an inch of a scratch that reach lower down my thigh than my shirt did, I was making the people around me extremely uncomfortable. It didn't occur to me because I wasn't ashamed of what I had done. I was ashamed of not eating when I was 17, but I wasn't ashamed of this. Which is not to say that I was proud of it — I wasn't. It was just something I did, because I needed to.

It didn't even occur to me that I ought to be ashamed of myself until the day that I came to visit S — in his office and he pulled me away from the group of people I was talking to and ushered me out in a great hurry and all because he was afraid someone would "see something." God forbid.

Would I cut myself now? I don't know. When I did it, it was for a good reason. If I did it again, I'm sure that it would also be for a good reason. I guess that the cutting is really beside the point. It is the reason for cutting that I would like very much to avoid...



Asylum Letter No. VIII

During my first week in the Asylum, no one spoke to me, and thank the Lord for it -- I had enough to manage simply breathing and standing upright. I have since learned that there is a sort of system in place here -- a rather harsh one perhaps, but understandable within a hierarchy with few criterion by which to distinguish the queen from the slave.

The system is as follows: The new inmate arrives and is immediately sentenced to silent neglect by the other inmates, which is only a sentence because she will not have the privilege of being warned or prepared in any way for the horrors which she will soon find herself subjected to. Her first bath, her first examination, her first leeching -- all will come to her as an excruciating surprise.

With the passing days, I have begun to realize the purpose of this apparent cruelty: it is a sort of test. Would the new inmate be capable of enduring this hell with even the slightest degree of sanity after a day? Two days? A week? If the poor prisoner seemed still to possess some control over her mind and had not fallen prey to babbling and hysterics, then she would be welcomed, as I have been, into the most exclusive and well-guarded organization within the Asylum:

The Striped Stocking Society

The S.S.S. is a small and secret consortium consisting of the inmates of intellect, and existing solely for the purpose of keeping each other alive, for we all know that once we lose our wits we will begin to die.

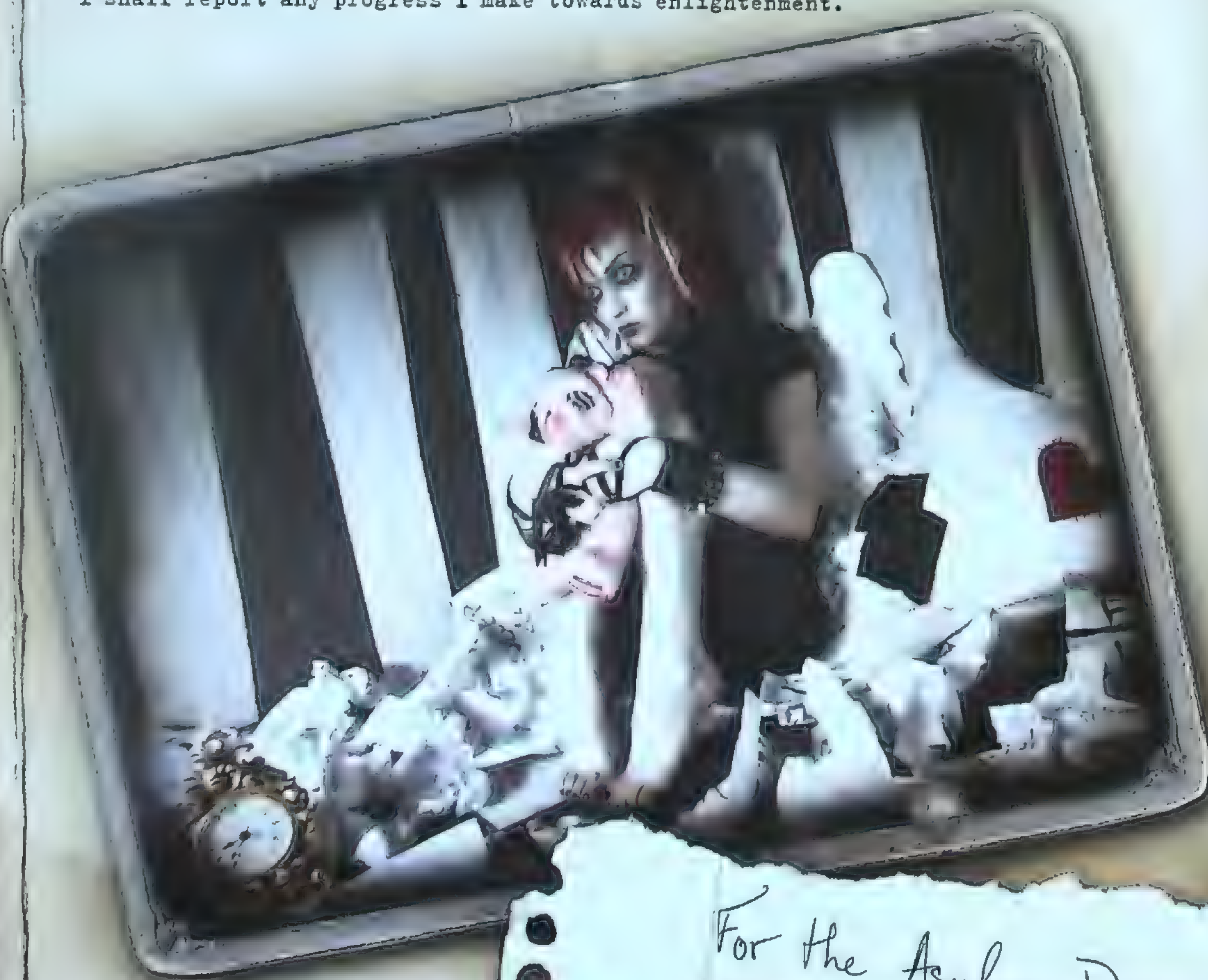


# A

## Asylum Letter No. IX

Lying in my bed at night (a hideously uncomfortable metal beast, but more on this another time), I have been repeatedly awakened by a scratching sound coming from somewhere inside the walls. I cannot guess what it is, nor can I locate the exact source, except to say that it seems to be coming from within the wall directly behind my bed...

I shall report any progress I make towards enlightenment.



For the Asylum Doctor, a cured patient  
represents a serious threat. If you're well  
enough to leave, you're well enough to talk.

# A

## Hospital Entry 15: Rat Dream

After waking up at four o'clock in the morning yet again, I tried to go back to sleep, but fidgeted restlessly as I usually do. Finally drifting off, I had the strangest dream...strange even for me. In it, I was lying on a bed high up off the ground. From some dark corner of the small, confining room I was in crawled a rat. Much larger than I imagined any rat had a right to be, it moved along the floor next to my bed. A blurred female figure more familiar than I with the comings and goings of the Asylum's resident rodents entered my cell. Cell? Wait a minute...am I dreaming in Emily's world now? I wonder if this is all going a bit too far...

"What was that?" I asked the figure, whose face I could not make out, just to be certain that my eyes had not deceived me.

"A rat, of course," she replied, not at all shocked when I told her that the approximate size of the rat was bigger than any cat who may have liked to eat it.

Then, as if to confirm the accuracy of my description, another rat of the same size darted from one side of the floor to the other, followed by some smaller rats as well as some big as dogs, all seemingly appearing out of nowhere for the solitary purpose of proving their bizarre existence. As this extraordinary scene played out, I looked down from my bed with a heady combination of horror and delight, the latter because I go all mushy over any sort of animal, and I am certainly not afraid of rodents, having kept pet rats as a child, and the former because, much as I admired them, there is something disconcerting about seeing a mass of living creatures of any species, be it spiders, rats, or humans.

However, my alarm soon subsided; I was hypnotized by what had become a living, bustling carpet of sleek fur in gray and tawny brown, and when a particularly large rat (funny how things become relative so quickly) with sleek white fur and a fawn colored hood and stripe running down its back scurried to my bedside and raised itself to rest its hands (paws? claws?) on the edge, peering at me and sniffing like a hound, it seemed to me to be utterly natural, and I let the rat inhale me until it had learned whatever secrets I had to hide. When the fawn colored rat had satisfied itself, away it scampered, and all of this I believed was a dream until I never woke up.

What is happening to me?

to talk.



## Asylum Letter No. X

I have been an inmate of the Asylum for Wayward Victorian Girls close on three months now, and have come to know the following thing with the utmost certainty: If madness exists here, it does not live behind the bars.

For example!

### QUARANTINE:

...does not mean "quarantine." It is the dungeon in which we are thrown to be punished for our misdeeds, whether we know what they are or not. The newest inmates do indeed pass their first nights here just as I had, but it is not done to protect the rest of us against disease from the outside -- it is done only to slaughter any remaining spirit in the poor girl, and to prepare her, by way of a good shock, for her life to come, if a "life" it can be called.

### BATHING:

This must be one of the most inhumane practices here, not because it is unpleasant (everything here is unpleasant), but because of its deadly consequences. To begin with, do you remember, Diary, how we are all to come forward in groups of ten to be doused by the watering hose? Well, oftentimes, one of the more incoherent of the prisoners will not realize that she is one of the ten, and so does not step forward with the rest. Having learned well that all attention is bad attention here, those disobedient girl is dragged away by heavy-handed attendants to the Hydrotherapy Chamber. Here, the wretch will be submerged in icy water. If she reacts and struggles to breath, then the treatment is deemed a success, and there are congratulations all round, never mind the near certainty that the patient will die shortly afterwards from cold-induced illness. If she happens to drown and so does not react, then the patient is considered to have been just another of the many "incurables," and, as such, her death is no great loss.

This reminds me terribly of the witch trials of old I had read about years ago where a girl suspected of being a witch would be bound hand and foot, then dropped into deep water. If the accused floated to the surface and did not drown, then she would be proclaimed a witch indeed and burned alive. If, however, she did not float to the surface and drowned as any mortal creature surely would, then the girl would be proclaimed innocent and not a witch after all. Of course, since she was quite dead by then, it seems to me to have been something of a "lose/lose" state of affairs.

The deaths resulting from our bathing process are multiplied because of the damp and cold it entails, even for the inmates who do as they're told. While death in the Asylum is a frequent visitor who even has his own robe and slippers, there is a dramatic rise in the number of deaths resulting from pneumonia in the days immediately following our bi-monthly bath. Needless to say, the staff never seems to question this.

### DINING:

An alarm sounds at half-past six each morning, and those of us who are not chained to our cells assemble in the Dining Hall for breakfast. Breakfast in the Asylum is a ceremony unlike any you will ever witness elsewhere. There is much shrieking and shouting amongst the girls who either always were, or have now gone, truly insane, while a solemn silence and downcast eyes grace the visages of those of us who have still a few of our wits left. An enormous pot of soup is set down with a great thud at one end of each of the several dozen tables, the contents inevitably sloshing over the

sides and onto the warped wooden floors now encrusted with filth as a result of this. In each pot is a rusty ladle. The girl to reach the table first fills each of a tall stack of tin bowls, dented and scratched, and often having not been washed since the last meal, then passes them out one by one to the rest of the inmates as we crowd around her to receive our share. We then take our places on the long wooden benches flanking the tables. This may sound bearable enough, but prepare yourself! The soup is made of whatever scraps are leftover from the staff's meals, and supplemented by whatever is left of ours from the previous day. The Asylum diet consists primarily of this soup because, not only is it a practical choice from the point of view of the kitchen staff, requiring no effort to make as well as being the perfect solution to the problem of kitchen waste (that problem making the kitchen a favorite haunt for the many rats who inhabit the Asylum), but it can also be both served and eaten with a spoon -- rather important criteria within an institution that does not allow the use of forks and knives. (We are given to understand that this denial of sharp objects is done so that we cannot injure ourselves, but, as the staff is only too happy to use sharp objects against our persons, I have come to suspect that the withholding of proper flatware is rather so that we cannot injure the staff.)

We are always kept hungry to ensure that we are too weak to cause much trouble, or to fight the staff when they cause trouble for us, although many girls fight anyway, using that preternatural strength that often accompanies madness, or desperation. Despite our hunger, some of us don't eat any breakfast at all on days when the soup is particularly foul -- when it contains rotting meat for example -- though we are fortunate to rarely have meat anyway as it is considered too costly. Still others don't eat at all, neither at breakfast nor at any other time, and it is a wonder to the rest of us that they are yet living.

(Amendment: I have just spoken with a girl called Penny on this very subject, and am horrified to learn that those who disdain their dinners are force-fed with rubber tubes crammed down their throats. Unsurprisingly, many girls die of choking as a result of this. Personal Note: Eat whatever possible, whenever possible.)

The last sort of inmate is she who will ravenously devour whatever is set before her, and will then set upon the bits leftover by those who can't stomach them. I envy those girls; they are most often the ones who have been here longest, and have lost all sense of what is beyond eating, beyond seeing, beyond thinking. No delicacy remains in them, a loss that serves them well, for, without delicacy, they can attend solely to the business of their own survival. I still have my delicacies, and so, most of the time, I starve. For our dinner, we are each given a chunk of stale bread, and without this I would surely have turned to dust already. Occasionally, one of the doctors will have had some visiting inspector or other for supper in his quarters (a bit nicer than ours, so I hear), in which case one of the more sympathetic kitchen maids may toss us a few biscuits or a lump of sugar, though she is dearly punished for it if caught; these little gifts seem only to cause chaos and, in truth, are better done without; there is always one of the stronger girls ready to snatch up the booty and tie it in the hem of her shift or stow it down her stocking, all the while growling viciously at anyone who comes too close. Once back in our wards, the hoarded goods will be used as currency. The metal spoons we sometimes manage to nab from the breakfast table are a highly sought after treasure as well; this explains why it is most often the stronger or the faster girls who have the largest spoon collections, some numbering into the hundreds, and all stashed inside their thin straw mattresses. I suppose that, if you're not going to get a good night's sleep anyway, you may as well have a lot of spoons.

At breakfast one Sunday, a rat was found floating dead in the soup pot. It was my turn to serve, and so it was I who saw it first. I had not wept during my entire incarceration to that point, but now, the futility of our collective efforts to "behave" or to "get better" in the hope of release, the complete and utter hopelessness of our situation, all descended upon me, and a profound sorrow flooded my very being as I looked down at the poor creature, paws outstretched, reaching for his freedom even as he died; I could do nothing but hide my face in my hands. In line behind me was the girl with the mass of black hair, the same that had frightened me in Quarantine on my first night in the Asylum. She was again wearing her tri-corner hat of folded paper. I think it was meant to resemble something a pirate might sport, and I saw that it was made up of bits of our striped wallpaper (the same I have been writing these entries on) supplemented with druggist receipts and other rubbish the hat's owner had no doubt found lying about the unswept floors. Overhearing the conversations of the other girls, I discovered that this curious character was called Jolie Rouge, which didn't sound like a real name to me.



Jolie Rouge peered into the soup pot to see what had upset me so. Then, something remarkable happened. As I sat on the bench, wiping away my tears, Jolie quietly lifted a bowl and filled it with the rat soup. Suddenly, she turned and flung the bowl directly at one of the attendants (which the girls call "Chasers" for obvious reasons) employed to keep the lunatics under control during mealtimes. The Chaser was stunned; there was a collective gasp -- anyone could guess the consequence of such a rebellious act. Knowing, as so many mad girls do, that silence is made to be broken, one of the inmates at the far end of the room erupted in hysterical shrieks of laughter. All at once, the entire Hall burst into a riot of wild shouting and flying soup bowls. As the soiled Chaser lunged at Jolie, she leaned towards me, saying, "Take the rat...we bury him in the Walking Yard today!" Jolie was dragged away; the other Chasers on duty were making comical attempts to quell the chaos, and I saw my opportunity. I fished the rat from the pot by his tail, stripped off the one of my stockings that was not covering the still-hidden key, and stuffed the dead animal inside. Once the mayhem had been contained, we were led back to our Cell Blocks and locked inside again. I had managed to sneak in my bundle unnoticed.

Every Sunday afternoon, those who are able are allowed to stretch their legs in the Walking Yard, which is really nothing more than a small, fenced-in patch of dirt guarded by a Chaser whose solution to every problem is a hard strike across the face with his baton; because of this, broken lips and black eyes are quite common things to see emerging from the Yard, but, to most of us, the air is worth the injuries. When I arrived at the gate of the Yard that afternoon, one missing stocking and a dead rat held behind my back, Jolie Rouge came to meet me. Her arms were covered in fresh purple bruises and she walked with a limp; I knew she had been severely punished for her actions taken on my behalf, but before I could say anything in apology, she pointed to the far corner of the Yard. Eight girls, all of whom I would soon know well as members of the Striped Stocking Society, stood around a small hole dug in the dirt, concealing it from the Chaser on watch. As Jolie and I approached, the girls moved aside to allow us into the circle, and I saw that they all carried sad bundles of weeds against their chests.

"The deceased is now present," announced Jolie, in her peculiar accent. "Let the funeral commence."

I stepped forward and produced the rat from the stocking. Kneeling in the dirt, I placed the body in the ground and ceremoniously laid the stocking over it.

"Shouldn't we say a prayer or something?" asked a fragile looking blond girl with a tiny frame set off by large brown eyes.

"I think Flea's right," said the girl next to her. "I saw it done that way when my mother died. Who should say it?"

"Valentine should say it. It's her rat," said Jolie, turning to me.

"Valentine?" I asked.

"Your birthmark," she explained, pointing to my cheek.

"Ah...well, I wasn't exactly born with it, I'm afraid..."

"I know."

I asked the girls to kneel, and they did.

"Dear Lord in Heaven," I began, "please accept this poor, drowned creature into Thy glorious Kingdom, for he was not merely another Asylum casualty -- he also relieved us of the obligation to eat what was surely a bloody awful pot of soup."

Each girl poured a handful of dirt into the tiny grave, and the weeds were laid on top. Within only a few days of the funeral, a patch of dandelions had grown up over the spot, and, every Sunday since, we pick them and make our futile wishes as we blow the downy fluff into the air and watch it float on, past the fence and far away to where we will never go.

We may not have our freedom, our dignity, or our wits, but friendship within the Asylum is alive and well.

## Hospital Entry 16: GO FOR THE PROTEIN

From time to time, the asylum "Nutritionist" chooses to interrogate me yet again on the topic of why I persist in denying that I have an eating disorder. It seems I cannot persuade her that, between living in a state of constant terror and having developed a nervous shake that never goes away, there is no way that I will not continue to shed weight whilst I am being held under these conditions. I am not throwing up what little food I can digest -- I don't need to. The Nutritionist is convinced that I am lying, and I am convinced that she is a bitch.

Funny, though, how aid emerges from the most unexpected corners. Kara, the very same who was roomed next to me down in the ER, that Kara, the violent, raving lunatic, infamous for purposely befouling her own bed, is now living upstairs in Psych Ward A West alongside me, Lucy, Violet and the rest of the mad and mopish. On the day following my "intervention," I'd been stuck in the Dining Room trying desperately to choke down what I could if only to prove everyone wrong. The other inmates had already turned in their trays and gone to the Day Room (which is also the Morning Room and the Night Room, being the only room with a television...actually, it's the only recreation room at all). Despite my affection for all things soy, as well as my sincere gratitude to the cafeteria staff for caring enough to finally provide a source of protein that I could actually eat, I couldn't stomach the veggie burger in front of me, huge and with all the trappings. To be perfectly realistic, there was no way that I was ever going to be able to eat as long as I was in this kennel, not ever. And yes, I would lose weight, and yes, the staff would all be thrilled with themselves because their convictions would be justified, and then they would force-feed me and watch me get fat, which I know would be a great victory for them.

Kara, now detoxing from crack and god knows what else, walked in to the Dining Room. Her hospital gown was hanging open, revealing pretty much everything I never wanted to see, and she was swigging a huge bottle of prune juice like it was tequila. Kara sat down at my table. I knew that I needed to ingest something with nutritional value -- that I'd really get sick without vitamins, but I was visibly suffering, every crumb taking an eternity to get down. The bread is always the worst; my anxiety, as well as the medicine, dries out my throat, and we never have enough water, probably because, if we did, we would be constantly pestering the staff to unlock the bathroom. I knew I was being watched and that everything I left on my tray would end up on some chart, and then I'd never get out of here.

Slouched in her chair, Kara lethargically looked at me and said, "Hey Pink, don't mess around with the bread. Just go for the protein."

I hadn't thought of such a simple solution on my own, and so I pushed the substantial bun aside to tackle as much as I could of the veggie patty, once microwaved, now cold. For one precious second, I felt like I had someone on my side.

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Because of the whole "eating disorder" investigation, I've gotten to thinking about the only time I ever bordered on such a thing. It happened during what I call my "major label experience," and it was brought on by the most degrading part of said experience: the Photo Shoot. After several successive long nights recording, I was driven early one morning to a studio where a stereotypically gay make-up artist was waiting, brush in hand, to paint my gothic pallor stereotypically orange, which, of course, he did. Everybody knows that sun-kissed girls make better pop stars, and we all have a job to do, right? The make-up guy was a perfect peach in comparison to the hag who came to direct the shoot. She pinched and poked at me, telling me how to pose (smile!), and arranging me in such a way as to conceal my ass, which, apparently, was horrendously oversized (FYI: I looked exactly the same then as I do now). This was...



awful words, deadly to an adolescent girl, haunt me to this day:

"She's not exactly petite."

She might as well have told me I was the most disgusting creature in existence, which, incidentally, is what I felt like at the time for even caring about such things; even then, I knew better than to concern myself with anyone's opinion of my ass. And yet, I was crushed, and so I did what any teenage girl would do -- I stopped eating. I didn't eat for so long that there came a day when I couldn't stand up without falling right back down again. Even now, I am more ashamed of not eating then I ever could be for being "fat."

## WIVES LOOK TO YOUR FIGURE!

*"No wonder my husband had me committed...  
if only I had known then what I know now!"*

FOR A WAIST YOU CAN FIT YOUR HANDS AROUND, IT'S:

TESTIMONIALS  
FROM HAPPY  
HUSBANDS:

"I used to find my wife such a bore that I employed prostitutes...and who could blame me? Her waist was a whopping 18 inches! But now, with the help of KILLJOY'S CORSETS, she has reduced to only 10 inches around, and our marriage has never been better! THANKS, KILLJOY'S CORSETS!"

# KILLJOY'S CORSETS



AND ANOTHER:  
"I'll never go out  
whoring again!  
(or only twice  
a week...)"

STILL ANOTHER:  
"Sure, I brought  
home a sexually  
transmitted  
disease, but SHE  
DESERVED IT!  
Her waist was  
monstrous!!!"

*do you call yourself  
A WOMAN  
WITHOUT IT?*

*"KILLJOY'S saved my marriage!"*

## Asylum Letter No. XI

Why, Diary! I've only just realized that I have not yet mentioned the walls.

Two days after my incarceration within the Asylum for Wayward Victorian Girls, I was removed from Quarantine and placed into Ward A, Cell Block 2. If you recall, it was on my first night in Ward A that I found the little silver pencil. There are several floors lined with cells within the Asylum. The cell blocks are arranged by age groups, with Block 1 housing the inmates even younger than I. I had been assigned a miserable, rusted bed in a cell housing more than one hundred other girls. The cell walls are solid on three sides, while prison bars stretching from floor to ceiling make up the fourth, which looks out onto the corridor that runs the length of the Ward. The solid walls are papered over with the same broad, black and white striped print to be found throughout much of the Asylum. This is, no doubt, an attempt to disguise the crumbling state of the walls beneath, but I can still see a thick film of filth, the mold multiplying in every corner, and the questionable stains left by decades of prisoners. The paper has aged badly, and the black and white are merging together into a doggy grey.

Ward B is the ward nobody wants to be transferred to. The inmates of Ward B are subjected to the same tortures as we, and much worse besides. I am told that the girls there are kept in chains and manacles, some being strapped down to wooden boards for years on end, some trapped in cages that allow no movement of any kind, and all being crammed into a den not fit for an animal; the tales of terror are endless, and are a popular topic amongst the Ward A girls as, after the gas-lamp in the corridor has been extinguished, we lie in our beds and whisper. What I did not know at the time was that we were, in fact, under constant threat of being transferred to Ward B, for it didn't take much. I have since seen several girls cross over for the most miniscule offences; some return to Ward A months later unrecognizably altered; most do not return at all.

I had survived in Ward A only a week when I woke in the night to discover something peculiar, to say the least: the stripes on the walls around me appeared to be...moving. Diary, I mean this just as I say it. I swear upon what little I hold dear that the stripes were writhing slowly upon the surface, undulating like seaweed beneath ocean waves, or snakes gliding through a stream. After a few days in the Asylum, you learn not to trust your eyes; it's easy to hallucinate when you're being bled to within an inch of your life on a daily basis. The cell was dimly lit by a half concealed moon; much of the walls were hidden in shadows, and I supposed I could be dreaming. Shivering from cold and fear, I sat up and tried to focus my eyes. From the bed two down from mine came a small voice.

"You see it, don't you..."

Save my first night in Quarantine, this was the first time I had been spoken to by another inmate, having been excluded from all conversation since my arrival due to the social testing period that I have already described.

"What is it?" I whispered.

Though I knew that what I was seeing was beyond impossible, I felt myself being pulled towards the wall by the hypnotic movement of the stripes, and I rose from my bed.

"I'm not supposed to talk to you..." said the voice.

The Striped Stocking Society's test was being enforced. A minute passed and the girl spoke again, apparently unable to contain herself.

"They say that the house is alive...they say your eyes adjust...that you see it..."



you've been here long enough. It didn't take long for you, did it..."

"How is it possible?" I asked.

"This place is packed with ghosts, you know. Some think that it's the spirits of the girls who used to sleep here living in the walls, but I don't know...sometimes I think we've all just gone mad."

I returned to my bed and watched the walls creep until light came through the bars of the tiny window. Now, weeks later, the striped walls still move, and I, too, am convinced that this house of madness is alive, though, in truth, I rarely think on it anymore; it's just there -- just another thing one grows accustomed to, like the talking rats.

## Asylum Letter No. XII

It was the day after the burial of the soup rat that I heard it again: the scratching. It came from somewhere behind my bed, I was sure of it...in the wall perhaps, or beneath the floor...from somewhere I couldn't reach. It was incessant, persistent, and it seemed to come nearer with every passing minute.

Before we are marched back to our cells every evening, all of us inmates are lined up in the Ward Hall and given pills and foul-tasting liquid concoctions to make us sleep, and for God only knows what else. These do not affect me anymore as I have gradually become insensitive to their influence, and, thus, I lie awake, listening to the scratching and going silently mad. I had to expose the source or I would get no rest; no rest means greater susceptibility to illness and infection, and that, of course, means death.

Stuffed inside my mattress was the sad stash of bits and pieces that I had pinched from wherever I could, whenever I could: the end of a candle from Dr. Stockill's laboratory, a match from the floor of Dr. Lymer's torture chamber, three spoons, my silver pencil, and several scraps of paper (I had learned the fine art of hoarding from the Asylum rats, for I loved to watch them as they gathered and stored their crumbs and sundry treasures). I lit the stub of wax and inspected my cramped surroundings. Searching beneath my bed, I found a small pile of debris just below a tiny hole in the wall, not more than an inch or two off the floor. As I watched, the hole grew larger, created by something drilling its way through from the other side. Not knowing what was coming, but admittedly anxious, I backed away from the bed and waited. Suddenly, all was silent. I held my candle near the ground; something I could not yet see crossed the flame's path, and a shadow grew large on the opposite wall -- a shadow of something awful. A profile projected in clear detail onto the striped wallpaper. I saw a pair of sharp claws outstretched, a long, snake-like tail, and there sat I with nowhere to run!

Then, from beneath the bed, a rat emerged. So this was my creature! It was of a respectable size, but nothing more. The rat sat up on its haunches and groomed itself thoroughly of the dust and dirt, licking its wee paws and wiping its face before straightening its whiskers. After a final shake, it looked up at me.

"Well! It's about bloody time!" said the rat.

"I beg your pardon?" said I.

"It's taken me ages to get through that blasted wall. Extraordinary that such a poorly made building should have such a damned sturdy wall, isn't it? It's quite exhausted me. Did you know that this place was erected directly on top of the city's trash heap? It's true, I can assure you, for many of us were there at the time. Quite mad, wouldn't you say? And no wonder it's falling down around us, don't you think? No doubt we'll all be buried alive someday..."

The rat advanced towards me.

"I say, you wouldn't happen to have any grubs, would you?" he asked, rubbing his paws together in a gesture tragically hopeful.

I searched my pocket (really just a bit of my shift I had tied up) for any remnants I might have saved from dinner.

"All out, I'm afraid," I said. "I'm terribly sorry."

"Of course not, of course not, no matter, dearie, no matter at all. Oh, goodness me!"



I haven't introduced myself! Whatever would the Queen say, what would she say..."

The rat hopped up to my knee and stood tall on his hind legs, clearing his furry little throat as though preparing to say something exceedingly important.

"I, dear lady, am Sir Edward, formerly prized pet of the young Queen Victoria, now Ambassador of the League of Plague Rats, and I am at your service, Madame." He bowed his head, and continued on. "It is with the deepest gratitude for the kind consideration you showed to our dearly departed Percy, Head of the League's ill-fated 'Operation Pantry', that I have come, on behalf of the League, to present you with a token of our appreciation and devotion." Sir Edward then jumped down to the floor, shouting, "Onward, Plague Rats!"

All at once, a small army of rodents marched out from beneath the bed. On their backs they shared the burden of a stuffed toy bear. Faded pink, rather shabby, with patches covering torn bits and a missing eye, the bear also had specks of what appeared to be dried blood matted deep into its scrappy fur.

"And, halt!" commanded Sir Edward. He addressed me once again. "Several years ago, the Asylum was graced by the presence of a young lady just about your age. She was as good a soul as God makes, and was a great friend to the League. It was at that time that the villainous murderer known as Dr. Lymer was appointed, and she, our lady, was his first victim, being bled to her most untimely death."

At this, the rats gathered behind Sir Edward bowed their heads.

"Awwwww..." they sighed in unison.

Sir Edward waved his paw towards the bear.

"Her only belonging we now present to you, my dear."

"For me?" I was overwhelmed by the gift, yet I knew that I must respond appropriately to such a venerable company as had now congregated around me. "Well! I am honoured, and I shall keep it well, though I do hope it won't mind living inside my pitiable mattress."

I took up the tattered toy and was instantly overcome with a profound sadness. The thing seemed to carry within it the pain of all who had suffered within these walls, and tears rose to my eyes.

"I am sorry," I said, "I don't know what could be the matter with me."

A small white rat with a black hood uttered a whimper in sympathy; the larger rat next to him delivered a playful slap to the back of his head. A moment later, and I had composed myself.

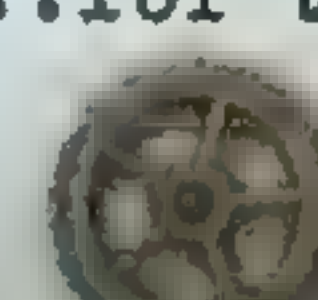
"I will cherish and protect it, and I do thank you all very much."

With a parting bow, Sir Edward led his League back beneath my bed and towards the hole in the wall that they had entered by. Before disappearing, he turned back to me.

"If you don't mind, dearie, I shall leave this tunnel open. I believe we may have need of each other in the coming days."

"Of course, Sir Edward. Oh! And I almost forgot to thank you...for the pencil, I mean."

Like bipolar people, a rat's  
most active time is in the  
middle of the night.





Asylum Letter No. XIII

Sir Edward comes to see me quite frequently now that his tunnel is finished, and through which he very kindly brings me the paper on which to write these continued entries. Such is the reason for the disorderly appearance of this collective manuscript, for one day he may present me with a lovely sheet of parchment thieved from Madame Mournington's carved walnut secretary, and, on the next, a simple scrap of brown paper used to wrap the deliveries of deadly chemicals to the Asylum; still the next, he may produce nothing more than a torn strip of the striped wallpaper, something I could easily obtain for myself, but which is of infinitely greater value coming from my diminutive friend.

There is a fair amount of hollow space inside the crumbling walls where the rats stockpile the riches they collect, for rats are exceedingly fond of collecting things (the League has been building up an impressive store of pencil lead for me in the space behind my bed, this portal having proven quite valuable indeed). They seem always to hoard as though planning for some future event, though whether or not they know what that event may be I cannot say, and have never asked. I often observe one of the League toiling for hours to reach a strip of paper peeling from high up on the wall; should he finally succeed, the rat will take his hard-won prize and tuck it away inside one of the many hidey holes, only to scurry directly back to the wall to do the same thing all over again.

When the inevitable day comes that the world will use scraps of striped wallpaper as currency, the rats will be well prepared, and so I, for one, shall not laugh at them, lest I need to borrow money in future.

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Asylum Letter No. XIV

It is easy to be thrown into Quarantine -- too easy. Refusing to take the medicine you know will make you sick...struggling against the Chasers as they drag you to the Hydrotherapy Chamber to be nearly drowned...speaking to Madame Mournington as she patrols the Ward before the lights go out, swinging her Ward Key on its chain as if to taunt us with the very tool of our freedom...any disturbance in the Asylum's enforced peace can land a girl down in the dank, dark dungeon until someone remembers to let her out, which may not happen for days, or even weeks.

Having served her sentence for the soup rat incident, Jolie Rouge has returned from Quarantine at last to join us upstairs in Ward A, Cell Block 2. Nights are difficult for me to endure; I have too many dreadful memories still playing out inside my head like a shadow that I can never lose, and so I sleep wretchedly, clutching the shabby pink bear I know I am far too old to be sleeping with. Still, it gives me some small comfort, and I have named it Suffer, for I am sure that it has witnessed much of suffering here. I often wake several times in the night to see Jolie Rouge crouched upon her bed across from mine, her slight frame turned to face the cell door in frozen anticipation, just as I had seen her on my first night in Quarantine. I cannot tell when she sleeps, for surely she must, and I have begun to wonder whether it is possible to sleep with one's eyes open.

Though she has been kind to me, I must be truthful and say that Jolie Rouge frightens me a little. I do not think I am alone in this sentiment -- I can see it in the eyes of the younger girls who flock around her as she stalks the Ward Hall during the day, walking the perimeter and constantly going to the small, barred window as though watching for something, or someone. These girls admire her, for she is one of those rare souls who seem to contain a reserve of renewable strength deep within, and I think they do believe that she is looking out for them; everyone knows that Jolie keeps watch at night. Still, they are intimidated by her.

One morning as we sat bent over our garbage soup in the Dining Hall, a talkative girl of perhaps fourteen asked Jolie the reason for her commitment to the Asylum. The girl herself had only just arrived, and knew nothing of protocol or inter-Asylum politics. Jolie looked up from her bowl, her head rising proudly beneath its nest of matted hair.

"I, you may as well know, am a pirate," said she, "and I was captured in battle."

"Oh!" gasped the girl.

Muffled laughter could be heard from two older girls at the far end of the table. Jolie took no notice. I remained quiet, desirous of hearing the tale quite as much as the new inmate was.

"Did you sail in a real pirate ship?" the girl eagerly asked. "The proper sort with sails and a great black flag?"

"Of course I did," Jolie replied, clearly glad for the chance to share her story. "My ship -- for it was my ship and I was its Captain -- my ship was the prettiest ship to ever sail the high seas."

"Was it truly?"

"All of my crew said so."

"But how were you captured?"



"It was all to do with my First Mate, you see. We were under attack, and the enemy slew my First Mate before I could stop them. They came in the night as I was sleeping, which is not a fair way to fight, but they were not honourable pirates like I am. A pirate captain needs her First Mate...you know that, don't you?"

"Oh yes, of course I do!" said the girl, her eyes wide.

At the other end of the table, the giggling continued, interrupted now and then by mocking squeals of "Ahoi! Ahoi!"

Again, Jolie did not respond.

"But didn't you fight them back with your sword?" asked the incredulous newcomer, who obviously believed every word of the tale.

"Of course I did!" exclaimed Jolie, in a sudden burst of indignation. "And you may believe that the enemy did not sail away unscathed." She collected herself before adding in a somewhat conspiratorial tone, "I was said to be a rather dangerous pirate, you know."

From amongst the group rose a tall girl with her hair in long, loose braids.

"Well then, Miss Rouge, why don't you tell us the most dangerous thing you ever did? We're all dying to know."

Jolie turned to face her antagonist with perfect calm.

"I carved a man's eye out."

There was a collective silence, and the girl sat down again without a word. As the rest of us turned back to our breakfasts, the only sounds remaining were the clatter of bowls and spoons, and the mutterings of lost minds from the tables around us.

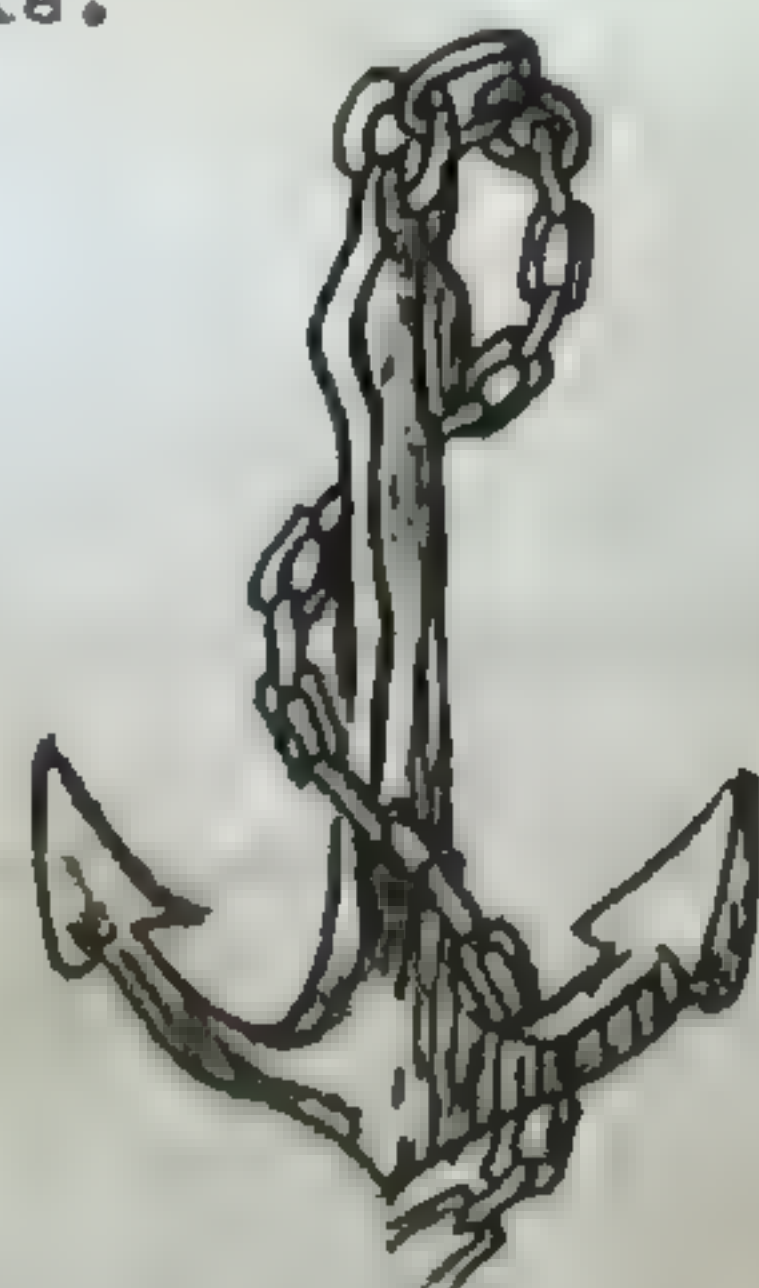
Lord knows the wards are full of storytellers -- some mad with delusion, others simply boasters, and still others concocting fables simply for entertainment, as we had not much else with which to amuse ourselves, or each other. Yet, despite her fragile build and refined, fairie-like features, there was something in Jolie's voice that compelled the girls to wonder whether it all might be true. I myself wondered.

On the afternoon of that same day, as we whiled away the hours between bleedings and purgings, I observed Jolie sitting alone before the barred window in the communal Ward Hall. She stared out onto the grounds behind the Asylum. Vultures circled at our eye level, for we were very high up. Jolie had been sitting thus for a very long time when I rose from my adopted spot in the corner where a pair of rats sniffed the ground around my feet, searching for crumbs that weren't there. The rats followed me as I wove my way through the sea of despondent souls, bodies and filth covering the floor. I arrived at the window; Jolie would not look at me, but I could see that her eyes glistened with all the tears she was holding back. I longed to touch her, to comfort her in some way, but I did not dare.

"I believe you," I said. And, for what it was worth, I did.

Jolie Rouge said nothing, showing no sign that she had even heard my words. One of the rats had crawled up to my shoulder, and I moved to return to my corner where I would wait for a Chaser to lead me to Dr. Stockill's laboratory for a dose of some awful liquid that was sure to make me ill. I had retreated only a few steps when, without turning her head, Jolie finally spoke.

"Thank you."



## Hospital Entry 17: MEASURING THE DISTANCE

There is something that I realized about society long before I was committed, and it is that people are rabidly fascinated by tales of life inside of a mental institution. This is a phenomenon that stretches back hundreds of years, as evidenced by the numerous observer reports of lunatic asylums throughout the seventeenth, eighteenth, and nineteenth centuries all the way up to the plethora of books written about these institutions and the lives inside of them even now, not to mention the movies depicting it all.

Why is this?

I believe it is because an asylum is a parallel universe with its own rules and social structure, and is therefore different and interesting, but also because people want to know if they could ever end up here as well. It is the same reason why people are so disturbingly obsessed with celebrities, their relationships, their ups and downs, their eating disorders... "Am I like them?" people wonder, half revolted by the idea that they could be, half wishing that they were.

People aren't just reading -- they're measuring the distance.

If I ever get out of here, I wonder if I will write about it. And, if I do, will I disclose all? Am I brave enough?

Oh, who the fuck am I kidding? I'll tell people more than they ever wanted to know. I'll never shut up.

Perhaps the doctors know this. Perhaps that is why I am still here.

But I'm not the only one. They say that it is in the best interest of hospitals to get the patients in and out as quickly as possible, and, as such, to rehabilitate them as quickly as possible, as opposed to the way things worked decades ago when patients stayed for years, or, more often, for life. I have not found this to be true. The staff seems quite happy to have me stick around interminably; they have not treated me with any degree of swiftness, nor have they endeavored in any way to speed my delivery back into society. I see patients who have been here for months, even years, many of whom I feel certain will never go home, who have set up their own little areas, who own half of a couch, who have made themselves surprisingly comfortable despite the extremely uncomfortable environment they reside within. They have been here so long that they feel it is their home, and they treat it as such.

The problem is that I do seek asylum.  
I seek it in every way, since as long  
as I can remember... in fact, it is  
the root and branch and leaf of everything  
I do. I seek asylum from the world, from  
people, from my mind, my madness, and myself.  
But there is no such thing as an asylum.  
Not anywhere. Not even.



Asylum Letter No. XV

Madame Mournington is most present whenever there is to be a visit from any important personage to whom the "presentable" apartments will need showing, or whenever a new inmate is being delivered by unsuspecting guardians for whom the staff will put on their stage play in the Entrance Hall, filled with tea and cakes and groveling butlers. It is due in large part to these elaborate demonstrations that the Asylum for Wayward Victorian Girls maintains its status as the pre-eminent and most forward-thinking madhouse in the country.

While Madame Mournington is an essential ingredient in maintaining the Asylum's facade, our mistress's most vital role is that of guardian and sole operator of the Asylum's Ward Key. She has the key about her always, most often turning it over in her hand, or swinging it on the silver chain dangling from the chatelaine pinned ever at her waist. The Ward Key opens the front doors of the Asylum, but, more importantly, it unlocks the prison-barred landing of the Lunatic Wards, formally known as the Ward Hall. Past the bars, the Hall shoots off in opposite directions, one door leading East to Ward A, the other West to Ward B. The separate wards are locked as well, and open by the same key. Madame Mournington permits no copies to be made, not even for the Chasers entrusted to guard us during the day, and so she is required to appear early every morning so that we may be led to the Dining Hall, and late every night as we are locked away again. I can see that Madame Mournington takes great pride in this duty; she is necessary to the institution, and I believe that this knowledge of being needed is the only thing that fulfills her, for, as far as I can tell, she is a lonely old woman who has but little else.

Madame Mournington behaves as the mistress of the institution when she is present, ordering the staff about and declining to enter the more unpleasant wards where the elderly and the deformed are locked away, for, while she has no sense of smell (I discovered this after watching her pass unperturbed by the rotting corpse of a girl who had died chained to her bed -- the girl had been bound in order to cure her of sleepwalking, and had been left there for more than a month), she cannot bear the noise and the misshapen faces. You might think, Diary, that this delicate nature would render our Headmistress sympathetic to our pleas, and that she might, thus, find some way to improve our conditions, but she seems to feel the same disdain for us as does her son, the great Dr. Stockill, and, even were she not so hardhearted, her singular talent for shutting out the distasteful is truly remarkable. She seems to execute what duties are hers as instructed by her son, closing her eyes and ears to all else around her, and, in this way, is able to maintain a sense of order in this underworld where no order exists. I suppose that, to Madame Mournington, it is enough to believe in her son and hope that he is right, but I think this is no excuse.

As for our Superintendent, he exhibits the strangest behaviour I have ever seen in a man of his age. While he appears utterly inhuman to all, expressing no genuine emotion grovels for her praise and attention like a child, or a dog. He is eager that she should be in attendance at the Asylum as much as possible, almost as though he is afraid that, should she leave, she might not return.

And yet, for all of her son's doting, I have this faint and formless suspicion that Madame Mournington fears him a bit, almost looking upon him as a foreign thing at times. In the corners of her eyes and the lines around her tense, tight-mouth, a sort of struggle seems to play out between these darker feelings and her desire to embrace and exalt him, as she is wont to do before visitors, and which she does perhaps to atone for her apprehension as much as for the sake of the company. And so, she follows his orders and plays her part, but whether she does so because she truly believes him to be exemplary in his running of the Asylum, or in an attempt to suffocate the guilt she feels over her uneasiness, I cannot divine.

What's the big fucking deal? Lots of amazing people have committed suicide, and they turned out alright.

Asylum Letter No. XVI

With each new addition to our army of little girls, our knowledge of what is happening in the outside world grows. It is most fascinating, Diary, to see what sort of creatures are committed to the Asylum: girls in the flower of youth, young brides, mothers, ladies with formidable educations, some having been teachers, some writers, poets, artists, accomplished musicians...even girls from the so-called "lower professions," Vaudeville performers, dancers, and an exorbitant number of prostitutes grace our decaying institution, and I am not surprised to find captivating characters and worthy friends amongst all of our ranks.

There is a voluptuous beauty called Veronica who occupies the bed next to mine in Ward A. Veronica had begun her career as a dance hall girl, but had later developed her own act, or so she says. She also claims to be an expert knife thrower who never misses her target. Veronica delights in telling us about her life on the stage, her tales faithfully peppered with racy anecdotes entirely unsuitable for younger ears. While perhaps eccentric (and who isn't?), Veronica has only two legitimate oddities that I can perceive, the first being her absolute belief that she has been pardoned and is being sent home the very next day, every day. It is tragic indeed to see her delude herself so, but, when the next day finally arrives, she seems to have no recollection of having said the very same thing the day before, and goes on to say it again. I came to realize that it is precisely this delusion that enables Veronica to exist from one day to the next with her ebullient personality intact, for she is one of the few who have managed to keep her muliebrity, her "womanly charms" alive inside this hell, and she knows it. She is quite notorious for loudly calling out to the Chasers as they patrol the corridor outside of our cells, and taunting them into giving her things she wants (usually a bit of food, a cigarette, or a newspaper) in exchange for particular "favours." Her shouts of, "Who wants to kiss me?" echo through Ward A at least thrice daily. And this leads us to Veronica's second oddity: She seems always to be in the act of taking off her clothes, and makes quite a show of it, almost as though she were still on the stage before the limelight and a voracious audience. I do in fact believe that she is most at ease in a state of nudity, for, even with matted hair and covered in bruises and cuts, she never stops the show, and I hope she never will.

We also have a considerable number of what may be termed "circus freaks," as that is how they earned their shelter before they were discarded onto the Asylum's welcoming doorstep. We have three sets of conjoined twins, a girl born with three legs, and several others with innumerable deformities, many of whom can still perform some truly amazing tricks, and do when asked nicely. There is absolutely nothing wrong with the brains of these unique individuals; they simply had nowhere to go after they were no longer a source of profit to their employers, and so they were left here to die just as they had lived: behind bars.

While each inmate has her own reason for being here, and her own exceptional story to tell, there are common elements that bind us all together.

Some are born mad, some achieve madness, and some have madness thrust upon 'em.

Had Shakespeare paid us a visit, he might forgive me my bastardization of his brilliant line, but greatness and madness are bedfellows in the brains of so many excellent souls that my version may be more apt than my humility will allow me to own. It is true that many of the girls here have loosened the reins on their wits, some having been born "disturbed," but most having become so through years of suffering, caught in that vain struggle to survive a harsh and unjust society that grants them few of the rights given to men, and even less of the respect -- that is how these girls became captives, after all. Despite our differences in class, station, and relative degree of sanity, most of us are united by the fact that we do not belong here.



"How, then," faithful Diary, "does a girl come to be imprisoned with no trial and no cause?" you surely ask. It is tragically simple really -- all that is in fact required is the word of a man who wants her out of the way.

The reasons for incarceration test the boundaries of imagination. I have become good friends with a girl whose own brother sent her to the Asylum after she had threatened to expose the unnatural relationship he had forced upon her. Still another had been delivered by her husband who wished to exchange her for a new wife in the form of her younger housemaid. Several of the married girls had once been young ladies of stature and considerable wealth, with lands and estates of their own. In order to claim the assets for themselves and do with them as they pleased, the husbands had committed their wives to the Asylum, and all of these cases were carried out under pretense of "insanity." In short, any male figure in a female's life has the God-given right to have her committed and forever branded as a lunatic, thus wrenching her away from her family, her children, and her very life with no proof and no trial. What's more, the unfortunate female can legally be released only into the hands of the man who first had her committed. Naturally, this means that most of the girls who pass through the Asylum gates will never stand on the other side of them again. We have many young mothers here who wait in agony for the day when they will be reunited with their children, denying the near certainty that the day they dream of will never come. We all process this reality in our own way, with some of the girls being unable to process it at all, and that is what ultimately drives many of us truly mad.

If a visitor to the Asylum were allowed to see its inmates rather than its actors, he would no doubt be shocked by our conditions and the torture we suffer daily, and would also be surprised by our general youth. Most girls who are admitted when they are young will not live to become old, and the few who do are looked up with the deformed in a dark corner of Ward B where they are forgotten until they simply rot away. This is the dismal destiny of all who are strong enough to endure the torture, and we all know it. And yet we breathe.

Besides falsehood and treachery, there are reasons enough why any female may be thought insane by the medical community, her family, and society in general. Opposing an arranged marriage, for example, expressing ambivalence towards motherhood, being melancholy after giving birth (or melancholy at all), choosing to follow a differing religious persuasion from her family or husband, being too high-spirited, too low-spirited, mildly disagreeable or simply "moody," caught exploring her own body, the body of a man who is not her husband, or, God forbid, the body of another girl...any behaviour thought aberrant by the impossibly narrow standards of our day is attributed to the inherent weakness and waywardness of the female gender. But, sisters, never fear! There are many methods by which female "insanity" can be treated. For example: A girl who engages in intimate relations before she is married, even if such relations are entirely against her will, is branded "promiscuous" and is thus insane (insanity being the direct cause of promiscuity in women), and yet, a common treatment performed on our girls suffering from fits of what the good Drs. Stockill and Lymer have termed "hysterics" is, in fact, forced intercourse, or, as we like to call it, rape. Is there not some irony in this? It is thought that the supposed hysteria emanates from the girl's reproductive organs having nothing useful to do, and, by putting these idle organs to good use, the problem shall be solved and the lady restored to sanity, which would seem perfectly rational if it were not so utterly absurd.

Dr. Stockill will have nothing to do with this practice as he seems to loathe our very flesh, but Dr. Lymer is all too eager to perform his duties in such cases, as are his assistants whom he allows to aid him in every capacity, all foul-mouthed brutes who smell of filth. It should thus come as no surprise to you that no condition is better represented in the Asylum than that of hysteria. The number of us diagnosed with the disease is truly staggering -- it is an epidemic, they say, sweeping the country like the Plague, and every female is at risk, for her hysterical condition could easily lead her to "unclean" actions.

But, hark! There is something that can be done to cure the mental invalid whilst making society a safer, better, more wholesome place for everyone: As a means of eliminating even the remote possibility of female physical pleasure, which hysteria would invariably increase the appetite for, and the existence of which threatens the entire order of civilization, clitoridectomies are routinely performed on girls who are thought particularly disturbed, girls labeled as "immoral" (though, most often, they have done nothing to earn this title), who have, for lack of other means by which to earn their bread, turned to, or were forced into, prostitution (I myself had been

forced into it, had I not?), or who were simply judged to be not quite as repressed as their families, guardians, and society in general thought proper. To anyone who should ever chance to find this diary once I am gone: If you do not know what a clitoridectomy is, enjoy your ignorance, for I shall not be the one to enlighten you.

Of course, in a valiant effort to eradicate the problem of female sexuality once and for all, a girl may have her uterus forcibly removed, cut from her body by one of our visiting surgeons while she lay, fully conscious, strapped down to that carving board known as the "operating table," and which has seen more death than a battlefield.

And then there are the suicides.

I often forget why I am here -- what it is that has branded me "mad," and then I remember my crime: I attempted to take my own life. By all logic, I had every reason to do so, if not the right. Even now, I have no motivation whatever to continue on in this world, such as it is, were it not for the promise I made to Anne in the churchyard. But no, I am not honest, Diary, there is something more: an undeniable bond has developed between many of us; we give each other a reason to keep fighting, to keep waiting, though for what we do not know. For Madame Mournington to leave her Ward Key in the lock? For the visiting inspectors to look beyond the pretty veneers? For mercy? Perhaps, but also we fear leaving each other alone in this place. The strain is too much for some, of course, and, despite the absence of practical methods, some of the more creative inmates have found ways to hang themselves rather than be murdered by Dr. Stockill's mismanagement of the mad.

And yet, while it is positively shocking how many girls are here for wishing to die and failing at it, it is even more incredible how many in the world outside are succeeding. News from beyond the gates is bursting with suicides, bodies found poisoned, washed up on the shore, smashed upon the rocks, or fished from the river, just as I had been. The press is not kind to our memories. In exercising the one option remaining after all others had deserted us, we are weak and wicked; we have committed an offense against God himself, and we are thus condemned to burn for it.

And how? A girl escapes her abusive father by leaping from a bridge, for example. The Church of England will not, cannot, allow her to be buried beside her own mother in the family plot. To do so would be to pollute the sanctity of the graveyard, though, when her father finally takes his place amongst the worms, he will be buried there with pomp and ceremony, all his sins forgiven. Anne was denied a proper burial because she had sinned against God and nature and was thus unclean, unprincipled, and destined for Hell or something like it. She had defied the religious belief in the sanctity of life. But whose life? Was her life sacred? Who protected her? Who is protecting us?

They call suicide a "female disease," which I do not understand, and I know very well that it is not, for in my own lifetime I have heard of many men who have done the same. We have little to barter with in the Asylum, but those who can stomach it trade their bodies for an evening paper. It is not so very shocking, Diary -- we have most of us been outraged physically already; our womanhood no longer belongs to us, if it ever did, so to gain a thing of even slight value by allowing one's self to be roughly handled yet again is really not so appalling, for knowledge may be worthless, but information is golden here. The papers faithfully list numerous deaths amongst the male obituaries, deaths which often looked suspiciously voluntary. There are differences though: male methods are generally bloodier, most utilizing guns or knives, and are thus considered "braver" than weak women's preference for poison or drowning (I have always supposed that this preference was nothing more than a simple consideration being extended from the dead woman to the unfortunate who would have to clean up the mess, knowing that the one holding the brush and bucket would almost certainly be another woman).

The assumed causes are different as well. When men take their own lives, they have a reason. Examples may include loss of prestige, fortune, or other professional disappointments. But, for women, it is extremely popular to romanticize her death by claiming that she had been driven to it by a broken heart, or that she had simply gone insane. After all, who in their right mind would do such a thing? Of course, in the dozens of instances I have become personally acquainted with here in the Asylum, forgetting my own example for the time being, nobody jumps from a broken heart alone -- it is never that simple. It is not always grand; sometimes it is merely a tragic end to a tragic life. But, in some cases I have come to know, suicide is a calculated refusal to submit to the tyranny present in virtually every aspect of our lives. For these girls, suicide is not a show of weakness -- it is a political protest, mad.



they themselves realize it or not. You must not think, Diary, that I condone or recommend suicide under any circumstances -- I do not! I merely question the sanity of those who would criminalize, and worse, brand as insane, the poor, the wretched, the persecuted, the abused, who find a death of their own choosing preferable to a life of someone else's. I was one of those girls.

Since my earliest childhood I have been of a questioning nature, and perhaps I think too much on these things, yet, the only thing more alarming to me than the growing rate of female suicide in London is the phenomenon of the artist -- writer, painter, poet -- intent on glamorizing the act. The papers are full of them: images of girls in mid-air, hair flowing, their lovely forms falling to lovelier deaths driven by beautiful despair, and even the forbidden peek of an occasional ankle beneath a diaphanous nightgown, framed by the proscenium arch of a perfect, moonlit sky...all serve to idolize this image of the fallen and falling female. Undoubtedly, many of these images are beautiful in their execution and even touching in their sentiment, but they are not honouring us; they are glorifying our weakness, belittling our suffering, and cheapening our deaths, thereby encouraging all. No, male suicide is a different sport altogether, and I shall not be surprised when it is given a different name too. But was it so very long ago that I sat in the library of the Conservatoire, wasting away my few free hours, my nose buried in some volume of historical encyclopaedia while the other girls strolled the school gardens, their delicate complexions being kept perfectly pale beneath fine lace parasols for their future masters? Insatiable was I to learn all that I could of the world outside which I was not allowed to join -- perhaps, had I been allowed, I would not have been as curious. What purpose will these hours serve me now, now that my shackles are tighter than ever? None, I suppose, other than to taunt me with my own knowledge, evidence against the illogical opinions of the day, evidence I shall never have any opportunity to present.

Amongst the piles of useless rubbish amassed inside my brain are stories of ancient Greece and Rome, where a man's taking of his own life was often considered to be a valiant show of heroic masculinity. History is positively littered with male suicides characterized as acts of heroism, self-sacrifice, and defense of honour. Lucretius, Kodias, Brutus, Cato, Ajax...even the Christian martyrs were celebrated for going willingly to their deaths, and I think you know what I am referring to. God, help me not to think! Render me a fool so that I may rest! My head hurts with trying to make reason out of nonsense, and it is all I do these days...

To our doctors: You embrace the symptom but you fear the cause, and so you deny it.

To the whole world: You trivialize our suffering. You say we take the "easy way out," and yet you fall on your swords for less and call it honourable.

With a world full of you, is it any wonder I should want to leave it?

You are cowards, all of you.



## Hospital Entry 18: IF LEECHES ATE PEACHES

Since I've been here in the Psych Ward, I have drawn more pictures of more leeches than could possibly be healthy. Not that I know what would be a healthy number of leeches to draw, but anyway... My notebook is filled with them, and rats too, and I fear it's become an obsession -- before, it was merely a fetish.

Browsing through my notebook, it is pathetically clear what I'm doing: I am creating characters, personalities, just so that I have someone to talk to. Well, necessity is the mother of invention, right? I do have Emily with a "y," but I am on the receiving end of that bizarre relationship, and I am desperate to give something...my time, my attention...I need a fucking dog.

Every few days, an inmate's parents or even an embarrassed husband will come to visit, tears and shame in their downcast eyes, not wanting to look at our surroundings, not wanting to see how horrible they are. The visitors sit quietly in a corner of the Day Room, trying hard to ignore the rest of us, or else they are ensconced in a small office with the inmate they've come to check up on. It's difficult enough for them to see their loved one in a place like this; seeing the other lunatics just brings it all into reality in a way that is almost impossible to bear.

But I? I have never been so utterly alone as I am now -- completely isolated and utterly forgotten. No one has come to visit me. No one has even called. The one person who knows I'm here doesn't give a bloody fuck, and the people who don't know I'm here...well, they will never know I'm here -- they'll never know I'm anywhere until I get out; nobody would know where to find me, and there is nobody to tell them. S\_\_\_ is glad I'm gone. I am an annoyance, and he is glad I'm locked up. I am forgotten even by the staff, which is what happens when you've been here longer than a week; you become a fixture -- something that exists here, like the stained green sofa or the buzzing fluorescent lights. As long as you're not screaming, you don't need to be attended to. And even if you are, well, good luck.

Though I was positively drowning in disturbing doctor visits downstairs in the ER, I have not seen a proper doctor since my arrival in Maximum Security -- counselors and nutritionists, yes, but no doctor; I have not been scheduled a single hour with a psychiatrist -- nothing. Which is not to say that a doctor has not been seeing me.

Two days into my residency in Maximum Security, who was there waiting for me in my revoltingly yellow bedroom? Dr. Sharpe. In the makeshift classroom where we lunatics are forced to sit together in circles and draw pictures in finger paint (not because anybody thinks this helps us, but only so that they can observe how we "socialize" with each other, as though being able to socialize with other lunatics is any indication of whether or not one is ready and able to function in the outside world), I hear a voice from the table behind me, and who's there, just waiting for me to turn around? Let's all say it together now:

DR. SHARPE

I am officially creeped out now -- I am being stalked within a mental hospital by the chief resident psychiatrist, whilst being held here against my will. Does it get any crazier than this? Dr. Sharpe doesn't work up here in Maximum Security. He has absolutely no reason to be here, for he directs his attentions toward no one but me, and by being here, he is neglecting his duties elsewhere. I wonder what the staff thinks about this? Surely they must notice.

I've had enough. I turn to face the Doctor; he is smiling flirtatiously; he's been waiting for me to notice him...surprise! I will say nothing. I will not acknowledge him. If he believes I welcome his impromptu appearances, he will never stop. I will



back to my table with a sudden renewed interest in the work of art a manic kid called Brian is painting for me as a gift; while it is very abstract and could represent pretty much anything, Brian tells me that it is actually the portrait of four corndogs. He is insisting adamantly that, if I only asked the cafeteria for corndogs, I would get them. I have no interest in corndogs, but, determined to play along and thereby appear occupied and, thus, unable to receive visitors, I tell Brian that, as a vegan, I would only eat corndogs if they were made of soy. Without a word in reply, he continues to paint, adding the word "SOY" to all four corners of the paper. I return to my own painting -- it is a portrait of yet another leech, gasping for blood, starving. Above the leech are the words, "WELCOME TO THE ASYLUM."

"That's very good!" says Dr. Sharpe, from over my shoulder.

And finally, I snap. Rising from my orange plastic chair, I advance toward the Doctor, meeting him eye to eye.

"If leeches ate peaches instead of my blood, then I would be free to drink tea in the mud!"

Did I just say that out loud? What the hell am I doing? The Doctor is flustered.

"Uh, what was that? You've lost me," he says, still smiling.

I am angry and it feels so good to free it, even in my own peculiar way.

"How could you possibly think," I begin, my voice rising involuntarily with each word, "that this...this was the place to put a suicidally depressed girl? Have you no idea what goes on up here?"

I'm chastising the head shrink in front of everybody, and I don't care. I can't stop...I never can once I've been pushed too far, which probably accounts for my ever delightful exterior -- I'm holding it in for fear of what will come out if I let go; there are no brakes on this car, and that is precisely why I don't drive. Besides, I feel that I'm finally behaving appropriately to my condition -- I'm the only one here who hasn't yet had a screaming fit, and maybe it's about time I try to fit in.

"What do you mean?" asks Dr. Sharpe, now looking shocked and wounded. "What happened?"

"What happened? Where shall I begin? Let's start with poor Lucy over here. She's lucky to be alive, and why? Because she nearly got her head bashed in by a fucking schizophrenic lunatic who smashed a guitar against a window. Why doesn't somebody ask her what happened?"

I point to Lucy; she looks embarrassed. She didn't ask for my help, but if she won't speak up for herself, then I will. It gives me strength to have somebody to fight for; I can never fight for myself, but, for others, I can kill.

"Oh my god..." says Dr. Sharpe, "I swear, Emilie, things like that almost never happen up here."

"Really, Doctor? Really? Because, how would you know that? When was the last time you were up here with the crazies? The real crazies -- not the people who have had a bad day, or who have popped a few too many pills? How much time do you spend up here in Maximum Security?" I'm in his face now. "Permit me to enlighten you: 'Things like that' happen here every fucking day. But don't take my word for it -- ask your nurses."

"What do you mean?" repeats Dr. Sharpe, looking really worried now; I guess our "date" isn't going quite as he had planned.

I tell him how, after the guitar incident, I had asked a nurse if that sort of thing happened often. "Unfortunately, yeah," she had admitted. And yet, we give them guitars...

"And besides," I rant on, "even if it were true that this 'almost never happens,' do you think that really matters to her?" Again I point to Lucy, who has her head down worth, and she'd win. And that's just the beginning!" Here goes... "There are people crawling around my room in the middle of the night. That crazy bitch from downstairs

was dragged up here, kicking and screaming the bloody roof off this place until they strapped her to a bed and drugged her out of her fucking mind. I am forced to eat at the same table with people yelling as they throw their canned corn around three times a day." I don't know why I am so stuck on the canned corn, but I am -- I think I'm attracted to the absurdity of the situation. "Look, I'm shaking! I can't stop shaking!" I say. "Oh, yes, I'm feeling really safe here -- I am so much less suicidal now, in fact, I'm fucking cured, so get me the fuck out of here!"

Hmm. Maybe I can fight for myself after all.

Dr. Sharpe stammers some weak apology as the counselor who is supervising art hour announces that time is up and we all have to return to the Day Room for afternoon drugs. The inmates shuffle out of the room, leaving their messes behind.

"Emilie, time to go," the counselor tells me.

"I'm coming!" I shout.

She's treating me just like everybody else. Can't she see I'm having a conversation?

"You put me here," I tell Dr. Sharpe. "You are responsible for this. Did you really think that this is where I belonged?"

"Emilie," calls the counselor again, "we have to go."

"I'm coming!" I shout again.

"Dr. Sharpe...I tried to kill myself. I am a sad, sad girl. This is NOT where you put a sad girl to make her get happy."

"Emilie!" shouts the counselor, her patience having reached its end.

I turn to collect my leech painting as Dr. Sharpe stands in front of me looking bewildered; when I turn back around, he is slinking away without a word.

It's time for drugs. I take my place in the med-line and receive my pills in their paper cup as the nurse watches me with her hawk eye to make sure I'm not tonguing them. Patients tongue their drugs (holding the pills temporarily inside of their mouths when they're being watched, removing them when they're not) for any of three reasons: One, they could then spit them out. Two, they could stockpile the pills and use them as currency within the nuttury. Three, they could stockpile the pills and take them all at once, overdosing being one of the very few ways in which a patient can exercise any control over themselves and their bodies in here.

I haven't learned the fine art of tonguing, so I swallow the drugs. Afterwards, I shut myself up in the bathroom and cry.

The psychiatrist that I just had the pleasure of visiting told me that the number one complaint against both psychiatrists and psychologists is sexual harassment. That is fucking sick.

So, now as then, the mental health care industry is a safe haven for dangerous, predatory creeps.

Great.



## Hospital Entry 19: FOUR O'CLOCK

It's happening again.

There is something that goes on in the minds of many manic depressives when entering into either a manic or a depressive state (as opposed to a simple state of normalcy which, believe it or not, does exist) that nobody claims to understand, but that many bipolars in the far corners of the world can attest to, and that is the consistent waking up at four o'clock in the morning. And when I say four o'clock, I mean four o'clock on the fucking dot. How many times have I given myself chills by waking up yet again after only two hours of sleep, and looking over at the glowing red of the digital alarm clock that S\_\_\_ keeps next to the bed, only to see that number staring at me? I've lost count. And the thing is, you don't just wake up. You wake up with your mind racing, music churning over and over inside your head, the internal noise, words, pictures, absolutely unbearable, and it is literally impossible to go back to sleep. I used to lie in bed for as long as I could stand the torture before giving up and rising to go and work at something or other, but now, I don't even try. When the clock strikes four, I'm up and out of bed, making the tea (it is four o'clock after all) and generally causing great annoyance to the person still trying to sleep. In case you are thinking of becoming bipolar, note that this aspect of manic depression is not going to benefit your relationship. I have tried several experiments in my attempt to determine the cause of this phenomenon. For example, I have allowed myself between eight hours of sleep prior to four o'clock and two hours of sleep prior to four o'clock, but it is always the same. Four o'clock. It is enough to drive one mad if one wasn't already, which I suppose is impossible since madness is the only reason this happens.

Here in the Psych Ward, I do not have the luxury of getting up to read a book or make a pot of Lady Grey, and so here I lie in the dark, my cellmates creeping silently about the room, counting the minutes until the alarm buzzes, the fluorescent lights flicker on, and the nurse's voice pipes in announcing that it is morning, as though it were not morning until she said so. Have you ever been on an international flight where day and night become jumbled together because of the time difference, and then the cabin lights go off and come back on again some hours later at some random hour that has been decided upon by the crew who is doing you the favor of getting you "on track" with the new time zone? That's what it feels like here. We are told when to go to bed, told when to get up, and, since we do not see sunlight or moonlight or anything in between, we are drugged so that we can physically comply with this. Unfortunately for me, I am no longer responding to the sleeping pills as I should be and I don't feel great about asking for still more drugs, hence, the four o'clock internal wake up calls.

The most important conclusion we can draw from all of this is that I am on the verge of becoming either manic or even more depressed than I already am. Of course, I could always enter into a mixed state, which is the most confusing of all, so there are plenty of options. We'll just have to wait and see, won't we...

Isn't this exciting?



## Hospital Entry 20: AWAKE

Still waking up at four o'clock every morning. Tired all day. Seeing metaphors in everything again.

One of the defining characteristics of my thought process when entering into even a mixed state is my uncontrollable compulsion to make everything related in some way to everything else. Everything I see or hear or think is much greater in import, in scope, than whatever it may in fact be; everything is connected by cobwebs, lighter than air, yet cellularly stronger than steel, connected to innumerable other things, which are in turn connected to still more. This involuntary "association" obsession quickly spins out of control, and so rapidly, so relentlessly, that ordinary words cannot keep up, and so, automatically, my brain switches gears from words to pictures and continues on the same bend, though now entirely in metaphor. In my mind, I see an image that almost instantaneously morphs behind my eyes into another image, and that to another, and that to another. A person with a mental illness becomes a child with a parasitic twin, becomes a flea on a Plague Rat, becomes a sniper with a gun shooting at JFK, becomes the shadow that stalks you during your entire existence, and all this only in pictures, because words are too slow. If I manage to pause, the words are there, waiting, all lined up in the right order, and sometimes with witty (or so I like to delude myself) captions corresponding to the pictures...but words are not necessary. The whole world exists without them.

There must be a name for this kind of brain that must make metaphors of everything, that sees pictures in every word, words in every picture, words in every word...or perhaps it is not important or special enough to have a name. Perhaps it is simply called "being awake."





## Hospital Entry 21: RICH BOY

Occasionally, the inmates of the lower security ward that I was supposed to have been admitted to are marched through A West to use our Art Room, a room we ourselves are rarely allowed to visit; I suppose it would be too extravagant to give each ward its own set of poster paints and popsicle sticks.

As the lucky ones parade past the Day Room in their very own clothes, most of us simply stare, mouths agape, imagining all of the freedoms they are enjoying that we never will. Of course, they are imprisoned too, but it isn't like this. It is nothing like this.

This afternoon, as they walk single file through our hallway, I manage to fall in line between a pixiesque blond girl in a knit cap and a tall boy with the sleek good looks of young Hollywood and a too-stylish haircut that indicates he hasn't been here long. As there are several patients about my age, I slide into the Art Room unnoticed and take my place at a table. I learn that nearly all of the girls are here because they are nonfunctionally depressed, while nearly all of the boys are here to detox from hard drugs -- this usually being their last chance before prison.

The boy with the haircut has been here before, but has returned to us after a stint in Promises, a five star rehab facility located by the sea in my hometown of Malibu. In fact, Promises is the most expensive rehab facility in the most expensive town there is; the clientele are almost exclusively celebrities, and treatments include lounging about in the sun and riding horses on the beach, so it's safe to say that this kid's family is loaded. He is here to get clean for the third time. Why he has been relocated from Promises to a state-run mental hospital I don't know, though I suspect that his parents have simply gotten tired of rewarding him with elaborate vacations at ritzy rehab spas when he is still cracked out every day and crashing their Mercedes.

This entire experience is obviously a joke to Rich Boy; he spends most of his time acting cocky and flirting with the suicidal girls. He says he has seen me before and has taken to calling me "Picasso" because I am always drawing in my notebook. This annoys me. He tries to snatch my notebook like a fucking schoolboy picking on the girl he likes.

"Back off, Promises!" I snap at him.

"Come on, Cupcake," he cajoles, still after my notebook, "I just wanna see--"

"Lick my cupcake," I sneer, elbowing him away from me.

Rich Boy's attempt at smooth talk reminds me of the men I've known thrice his age, and I suppose he learned it from his rich daddy. After the hour is up and we are ushered out of the Art Room, Rich Boy asks if he can escort me to "bondage night" at a particularly hot L.A. club after we are both released. I am about as interested in this guy as I am in the corn dogs Brian said I could have if I only asked for them, so I tell Rich Boy that I have a boyfriend, which feels like a lie because, while it is technically true at the moment, I have come to the conclusion that any boy who leaves me in a place like this and doesn't even come to see me, if only to make sure I'm OK, is no boyfriend of mine, nor friend for that matter. If S\_\_\_ cared to visit, he might see what this is doing to me, what it is really like up here, and find a way to break me out if only in remembrance of the fun we once had, but I have given up on him, and have stopped asking to use the Psych Ward payphone anymore. After turning Rich Boy down, I can finally accept that I am on my own.



## Hospital Entry 22: HOLLYWOOD MADNESS

On the dreaded subject of boys and how they have helped to turn me into the Opheliac that I am, I once had a lover who was particularly famous -- a lot more famous than he deserved to be, but I digress. He too was mad, but in a completely different way. He was crazy Hollywood-style, which simply means that one's sense of entitlement grows exponentially until one believes that one is a supreme being with not only the right but also the obligation to be cruel to those around one. One believes that there is a code of behaviour that belongs exclusively to one's self, and that it is one's veritable duty to follow that code despite any hurt this may cause to other people. The laws of the world around one's self simply do not apply. Obeying traffic lights is also optional. This doomed relationship taught me, for better and worse, to question every aspect of my mind, my character, my madness, so repulsed am I by this paradigm, and so terrified am I of becoming like it in any way.

In my heart, I know that it is not in me to ever go there, no matter how hard the crazy hits. I tell myself almost daily that madness doesn't make one cruel, doesn't make one racist, sexist, homophobic, all things I had learned only too late that my lover was. I tell myself that madness, whether self-made or inherent, doesn't make one into a thing that does not already exist somewhere within one's bleak and wretched soul.

Maybe someday I'll believe it.





## Asylum Letter No. XVII

Life imitates art imitates life, and I'm stuck somewhere in between.

Every Spring for years now, the Asylum has opened its false doors to society's elite for the purpose of fund-raising, as well as for Dr. Stockill getting his name in the papers, fame being a thing he covets. Madame Mournington thrives on her role as Mistress of Ceremonies, and orders everyone about in her sharp tongue like a commanding general.

Veronica has told me of last year's event, the Asylum's "Mad Tea Party." Befeathered ladies and their gentlemen had been served an extravagant tea inside an enormous red and white striped tent erected on our front lawn. The inmates who were not wholly unappetizing to look at had been directed to "frolic" within viewing distance in their shifts and stockings, with a chain whipping promised if they misbehaved or made a run for the gate.

While most of the day had been a success (the gentlemen had a wide variety of ankles to ogle, and the ladies never tired of breathlessly claiming that one or the other of the inmates had tried to bite them, though both sexes ought to have been criminally charged with repeatedly exclaiming how positively "mad" they were about the basil and cucumber sandwiches), there were, of course, complications. For example, there was always the trouble of how to disguise the screaming emanating from the wards above, for, while it was mad indeed, it was not entirely suitable for a tea party. A small orchestra had been hired to make as much noise as possible, with the effect being that the guests, who had to speak very loudly to be heard over the music, went home with lighter purses but heavier heads, and it was said that Lord Alcock was considering legal action against the Asylum as Lady Alcock could not seem to lower her voice ever again.

This year, there is to be a thoroughly new production. Ever the shrewd proprietor, Dr. Stockill has recognized that there is big business in our patron saint of bridge hopping, the fair Ophelia. Somehow, Ophelia has risen from her watery, three-hundred-year-old grave to set the public's imagination afire. The heartwrenchingly romantic suicide paintings were only part of the trend -- now, people want to see her in the flesh. They can no longer distinguish between fictional personality and true sufferer, and so a third character is born: Ophelia the Icon. It is she whom the aristocrats will pay, and pay well, to see played out before them, and, on every afternoon for a month, a rude public will hand over their shillings to see the show as well: Ophelia, Shakespeare's darling, turned caged animal for their pleasure, and, in this case, the madder the better. Drawing upon the current craze for all things morbidly gothic, this year's exhibition is to be based upon shock, sensationalism, and sensuality, and from what more suitable stock of actors could one draw for such a play?

There is no need to stifle the tortured screams from the wards above this time, for that will only enhance the experience for our sophisticated audience. We may be exactly as we are, as long as we are entirely different.

As I write this, I am preparing to take the stage, and this, Diary, is how I arrived at the present point:

Early this morning, Madame Mournington traipsed through our Ward as she does on every other day, simply to see that nothing is amiss, but, today, she commanded all of us to stand against the bars and display our hair. Having no choice but to obey this strange request, we did so, though we had no idea what fresh torment lay before us this time. To her squinting eye, our Headmistress raised a silver monocle attached to her chatelaine by a long chain, and, peering down her pointed nose, studied us closely as

she passed, swinging her Ward Key all the while. She had brought Maudsley, the Chaser, with her, and, as Madame Mournington pointed the key at a select few of us, Maudsley pulled the chosen from our cells and lined us up in the corridor. I tried to determine what it was that distinguished the selected from those left behind, but all I could tell was that the girls at whom the key pointed were either exceptionally pretty or had at least some particular physical grace. They also had the longest and most splendid hair, which is why I was not surprised when the key was pointed my way; I have never considered myself a beauty, but I will take my pride in my red hair to the grave; it is all I have that hints at any sort of ancestry -- of my having come from some place rather than another. After pointing at Flea, the diminutive blond, Madame Mournington stood contemplating Jolie Rouge, who met her eagle's gaze, chin held high. Ever since the day of the rat burial, Jolie had addressed me as "Valentine" because of my heart-shaped scar; in turn, I had come to call the self-proclaimed pirate "the Captain," and, soon, so did everybody else. Jolie was wearing her paper pirate's hat, and, even through the stench of unwashed bodies, I smelled trouble.

"Take that thing off your head, wretch!" shouted Madame Mournington.

The Captain hesitated, but then complied, holding the hat behind her back.

"Hmmm..." pondered our Headmistress, "the face is pleasant enough, but the hair is revolting. However, I suppose it can be combed out..."

At last, the Ward Key was pointed towards the Captain.

Outside and into the raw wind we were marched, arriving at the Bathing Court where we were sprayed down with more than the usual attention. We were each given a bar of lavender soap to wash our hair with -- an incredible luxury even in the freezing cold, and nearly enough to bring tears to our eyes, so starved were we of pleasant sensory experiences. Many of the girls had knots in their hair which had not been properly groomed in months or even years, and they were roughly handled as a pair of kitchen maids tore through the tangled masses, snipping away the knotted strands with a pair of sewing shears. I hurried to rinse my hair clean and free of knots before anyone could approach me, but the Captain was struggling with hers. I moved to help her, but was pushed back by one of the Chasers on guard, who shouted at me to keep in line. I knew something was wrong. The maids approached my friend, but she covered her nest of black hair with her hands and refused to let them touch it. Two of the other girls in line giggled at this; I wheeled around and told them to shut up, which they promptly did. Though she had tried slapping them away, the two maids were now digging their fingers into the Captain's hair; she was screaming as if in terrible pain. Suddenly, the maids stepped back in horror: piles of black hair had come away in their hands.

"Her hair's coming out! Her hair's coming out!" the duller of the maids began to shriek as she fled the Bathing Court for the safety of the building. Now restrained by a Chaser, the Captain continued to scream.

"Give it back! It's mine!"

Finally, Madame Mournington entered the Court, her heels clicking sharply on the wet stone. Assessing the situation, she ordered the remaining maid to crop the Captain's hair as closely as she could with the shears, adding to the Chaser that Jolie's scalp should then be shaven clean, and that she should be placed into Quarantine directly afterwards until further notice. Helpless and heartbroken by her cries, we watched until every last strand of the Captain's hair had fallen in soggy clumps around her bare feet.

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Once bathed, our small band was led upstairs to one of the many chambers in the Upper Staff apartments; there, we were each given a cup of tea to calm us (my first tea in nearly a year!). The Upper Staff consists of the doctors, assistants, senior attendants, and Madame Mournington; the luxury in which they lived was astonishing. We had not imagined that such richly furnished rooms existed in the very same structure as our primitive form of Hell. The only visible link between the two opposing styles was the shoddy construction; the floors were still crooked -- anything dropped would immediately roll to one side -- and there were gaps where the walls and ceilings ought to meet but did not, bringing to mind a lavishly decorated cake hiding a multitude of sins beneath its icing.



None of us had any idea what was going to happen next, but the excitement that would usually accompany anything new was crushed beneath the shock of the scene in the Bathing Court, though I confess that the tea was not entirely ineffective in fortifying my spirits, if only slightly. We wandered about the room, passing our broken fingers over the gold trim of the mantelpiece, the silken curtains, the finely woven carpets -- such things as we had not seen in longer than we could remember. But while the other girls were feverishly stuffing their senses with the surrounding opulence, instinctively knowing that it would soon be gone, I felt within myself a mounting sense of trepidation, for the Asylum is not a place where nice things just happen.

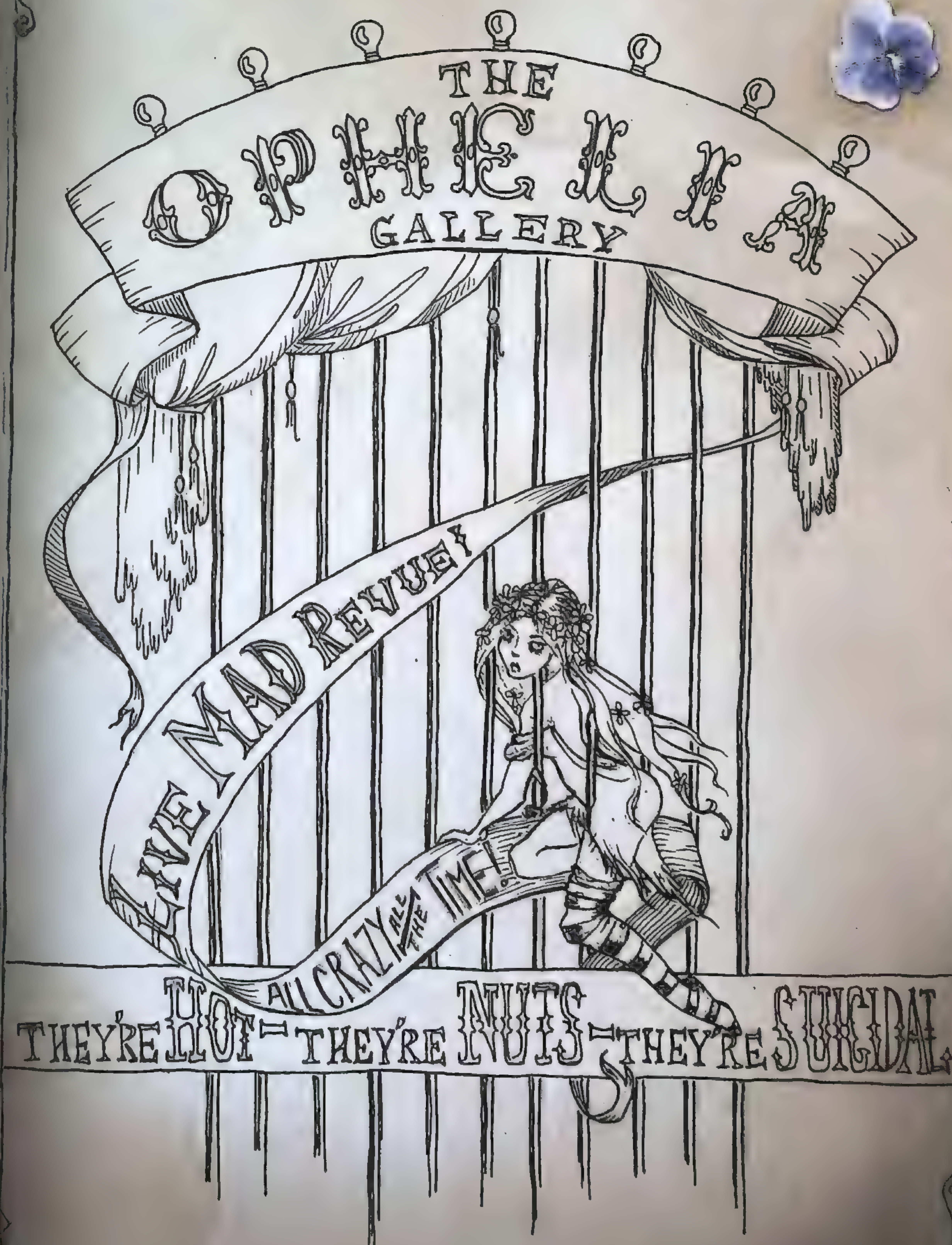
Some time later, Madame Mournington arrived, and all of my anger flooded back. What bitter enmity I felt towards this woman; she had ordered the Captain's beautiful head shaved without an ounce of feeling, and I hated her for it. Months ago, I had heard the whispered rumour of a dead child that Madame Mournington was said to be still grieving the loss of after more than twenty years. Truly had I tried to find pity in my heart for this cold and ignorant woman, but no longer; we all have our sad stories to tell, Diary, and I do not believe in excuses.

Finally, our mistress informed us of the event we were to take part in: Each day for the following month, we were to be the "Ophelias" in the new Asylum fundraising attraction, the "Ophelia Gallery." The Gallery was made up of a series of tents, each containing several cages on either side of a carpeted walkway, and whimsically decorated in such a manner as would excite the visiting aristocracy and amuse the commoners. We were to be the stars -- the caged animals in this lunatic rendition of the zoological gardens. As we were being instructed in our duties as "Ophelias," there was a knock at the chamber door, and a strange little man appeared. Bounding with comical liveliness, he was certainly the most flamboyant personage I had ever seen. This fellow was introduced as a stage actor, and we were told that he had been brought in from the city below for the express purpose of teaching us to convey the loon as the Asylum wished to portray her, for, though we would not profit by it in any way, a great deal of money rested on the quality of our performance. Following our eccentric tutor's exaggerated example, we were directed to languish, to sigh, our hands to our foreheads as though we would faint, and to play the part of the wretchedly lovely mad girl to the best of our novice abilities. In return, we would be fed something that wasn't yet rotting for a change, and we would also enjoy the days outside of our cells, though we would be just as caged in our gilded ones. Still, it was a difference, and we were hungry for it.

Dr. Stockill arrived to address us as he supposed a proper Superintendent ought. He was elegantly dressed as always, a flounce of ivory lace framing his thin, white wrists. He showed us no regard, and never looked into our sunken eyes. He merely told us in his grim and detached manner that we were to go forth and represent the weakness of our sex, and that, if we could make our suffering picturesque, God may perhaps be lenient with us for trying to take our own lives. I believe the Doctor thought that we were all attempted suicides, and it was then that I realized that Dr. Stockill hadn't the faintest idea what most of the girls here had been committed for, and, what was worse, he didn't care. I had long suspected that the Asylum's inmates were nothing more to the Doctor than a convenient supply of bodies for his chemical experimentation, and now I was sure.

The Doctor left us to prepare for our debut performance, and, as our acting tutor thought us sufficiently rehearsed, it was time to don our costumes. We were dressed in long, sheer gowns that moved like air against our skins. He helped us to weave jasmine flowers through our hair, their delicious scent a potent drug filling the room. A man of many talents, our tutor rouged our lips, and our eyes were theatrically blackened. At last, we were ready. We stood together before the glass, which was wide and very tall; it was the first mirror we had faced since the hour of our commitment, and thus we had lost all sense of what we looked like. I scarcely knew myself; my heart-shaped scar had darkened, and I was painfully thin, my ribs protruding. Yet, with our drooping flowers and long, shimmering hair (our only remaining charm), we were somehow magnificent.

As we waited in the wings of this next peculiar chapter in our sordid lives, we readied ourselves to go forth and misrepresent the suffering of our gender for the delight of the paying public.





Asylum Letter No. XVIII

I have survived my first day as a showgirl -- an entertainer of the masses -- and this is what I have to report:

The girls and I were led to the massive tents that had been raised on the front lawn. They were very grand in black and white, a stunning contrast to the soft colours and fabrics, petals and flowing fountains that decorated the interiors. Our cages were painted in silver and gold, and they sparkled in the lamplight; flowering vines twined up and around the bars, creating an enchanted prison. The Chasers in their black butler's coats and white gloves lifted us up and into our confines. Our doors were then locked, but we were used to that. Some of the cages were tall enough to stand upright inside, and mine even had a little hanging swing from which I had been instructed to appear in a constant state of falling, a suicide pantomime.

A string quartet tuned up as we were fashioned into living paintings by our acting master, who skipped about the tents, nearly hysterical with excitement. I saw the lead violinist, a stodgy old man with a sour expression, and I longed to wrench the instrument from his hands; I knew I could still play it, and play it better; it was horrible to think that I would never make music again. As I lay awake each night, my fingers moved over invisible strings, repeating every note I had ever learned, and then creating new ones. All of my training, and here was I in a gilded prison, wearing an obscenely revealing gown, in the middle of a frigid March. Still, I reminded myself of how desperately I had wanted to be on the stage, of how hard I had worked for the opportunity to speak and be heard, even if it were only through my hands. What if this was it -- all I get, my only chance? And so, I determined to fall from a swing better than anyone had ever fallen from a bloody swing in the entire history of swinging. I would not only depict suicide, I told myself -- I would become suicide. I would be the act everyone loved to abhor.

The tents were opened, and there was a collective gasp from the incoming crowd. No one had expected anything so lovely.

CALL OUT

Asylum Letter No. XIX

We are now a week into our performance as the "Opheliacs." Dr. Stockill had protested the name, with the complaint that it didn't make any sense and was ugly besides, but Dr. Lymer, who had coined the term, put forth the following argument and won:

"If you were to have an Insomnia Gallery, or a Hypochondria Gallery, or Pneumonia, say, or a gallery of some other such disease, would you not call your subjects the 'Insomniacs', the 'Hypochondriacs', the 'Pneumoniacs'?"

"Firstly, my dear Lymer, a Hypochondria Gallery is a ridiculous thing to imagine, even for the sake of argument. Secondly, I am not entirely convinced that 'Pneumoniac' is a word. And, thirdly, what is the disease of 'Ophelia'?"

"Why, the disease of 'Ophelia' is the disease of the melancholy, mad, and female; and we, my dear Stockill, own a great deal of stock in it!"

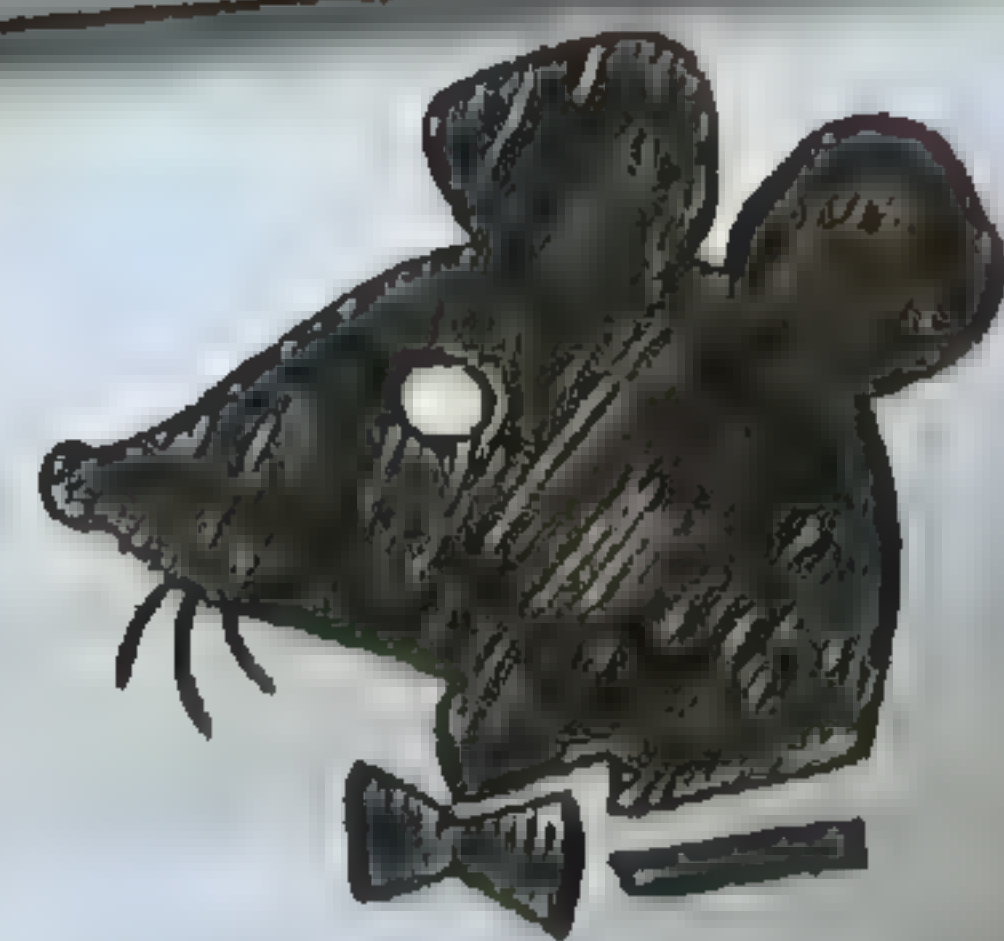




Asylum Entry No. XX

Another day of playacting at being mad, an odd thing, Diary, when we are told that we in fact are. Can you imagine a drunk pretending to be drunk?

Poor little Flea has been removed from the exhibition after having a fit: A woman who apparently resembled her mother walked past her cage, and Flea began shrieking and hitting her beflowered head against the bars. It took the Chasers on duty a good quarter of an hour to realize that it wasn't part of the show, and, by that time, Flea was bleeding profusely. A girl called Christelle promptly arrived to fill the empty cage. Originally from France, Christelle amuses the viewers tremendously by singing obscene songs in her native language whilst spinning around in circles. It is assumed that she is playacting as well, but the truth is that she does this everyday.

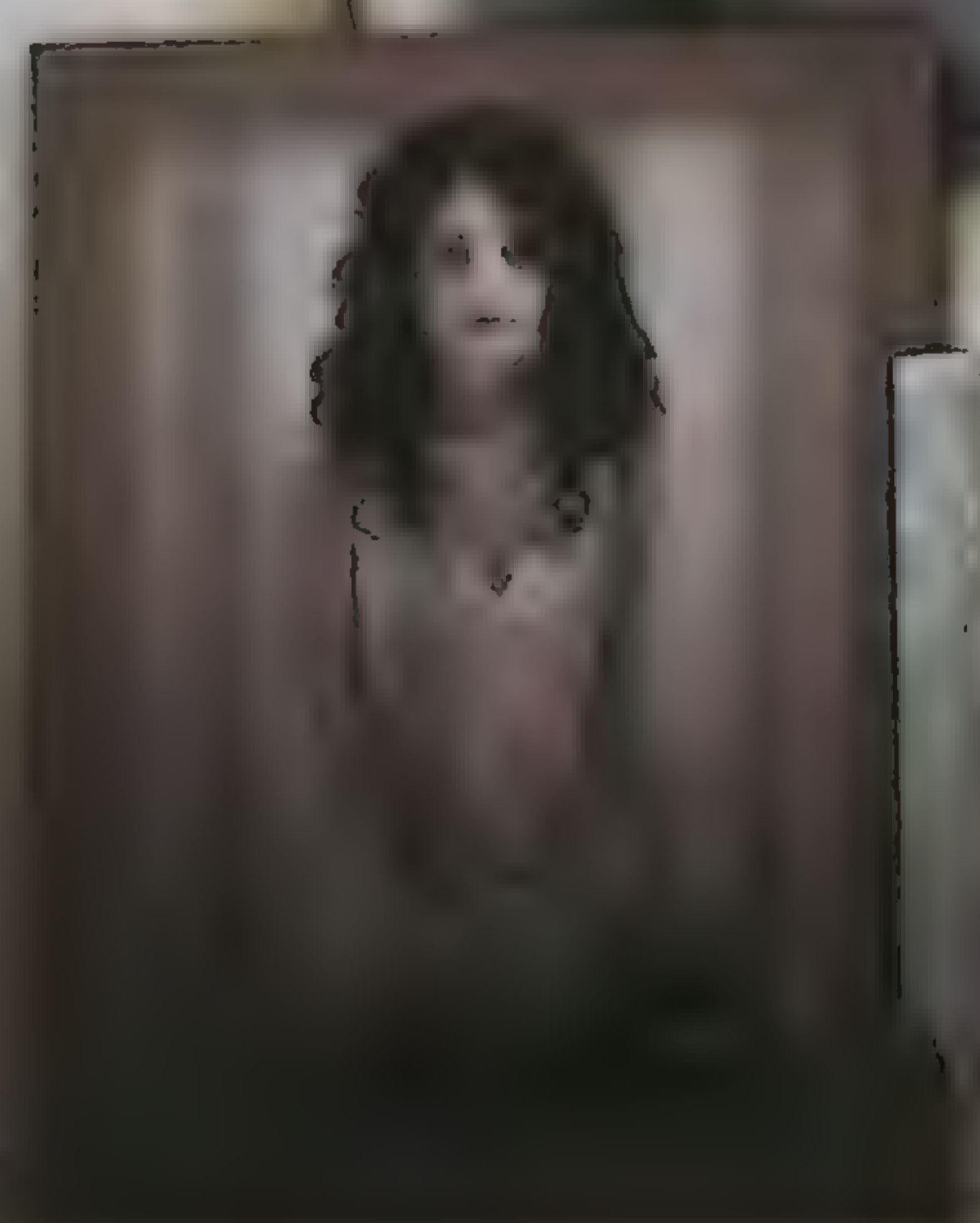


PLAGUERAT

Asylum Letter No. XXI

The greatest luxury of being an Opheliac is that we are not made to return to our wards at night, but are instead housed temporarily in the Servant's Quarters next to the kitchen. This is a palace after what we have endured in our cells upstairs, and we only feel the sorrier for the girls who are not here with us.

I think of the Captain often, and have a sneaking suspicion that I do not yet wish to share...





Asylum Letter No. XXII

Something ghastly has occurred today, something I do not expect to recover from for some time, though it has resulted in the solidification of my suspicion regarding the Captain -- not through fact, but through feeling.

Having become weary of the pointing and staring, I could bring myself to do nothing more than sit on the floor of my cage, facing the wall, with my head resting on the swing, and, in retrospect, I suppose I looked melancholy enough to be Ophelia anyhow. Suddenly, my stomach turned, and I couldn't breathe. I looked behind me to see a man wearing a grey eye patch making his way through the line. My heart leapt into my throat; I turned away and hid my face for a time, and, when I again looked out, the man was gone. I began to feel ill and doubled over in pain, unable to raise myself. A deadly fear had gripped me; I became aware of the reality of my imprisonment and the torture my mind and body had endured this past year in a way that I had been denying until that moment out of sheer necessity. Lacking sufficient air, I called to the Chasers for help, but they were occupied in helping themselves to the champagne intended for the guests. The pain in my abdomen was unbearable. The callous crowd was entertained by my suffering and howled with merciless glee, but when I began to bleed, the taunts turned to screams of horror, and two Chasers rushed forward to unlock my cage.

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When I awoke, I was lying on a cold, hard surface. I was still in my costume but it was soiled with blood, and a pile of rags had been stuffed between my legs. I opened my eyes and found myself alone in a cell I did not recognize. On the ground by my side was set a folded shift and the old familiar stockings of the lowly prisoner. My privileges had run out. In a daze, I tried vainly to remember the events of the day. I had the sense that something awful had happened, but could not sort it out in my head, which pounded terribly. And then, I remembered the man I had seen passing my cage. I dared not mention this to the Captain; I admit I was afraid of her reaction. My desire to know if I was right was not nearly as important to me as her relative peace, and her time in Quarantine could not have been good for her nerves. Had she even been released yet?

I sat up and tried to focus my vision in the dim light. Gradually, I became aware of the inmates inhabiting the cells surrounding mine; their eyes burned in their skulls, their postures were crouched like animals, and many simply stood facing the striped walls. It was clear from their appearance that they had not seen daylight in a very long time. And then, I realized where I was.

Ward B.

Asylum Letter No. XXIII

There are no beds in Ward B; we sleep on piles of straw like beasts. Just as it was in Ward A, the cells on either side of the long corridor are visible through a wall of prison bars extending from floor to ceiling, leaving them open to the drafts, the stench, and the probing eyes of the Chasers. The cells here are much smaller than those in Ward A, each containing anywhere from two to twenty inmates. I have been assigned to cell number W14 (as opposed to E14, F14, and S14, for there are several floors within the Ward). There is the usual small, barred window looking out onto the front courtyard far below; also as usual, there is no glass in this window, for we are all considered violent enough to break glass should it exist. Thus, it is freezing, and I wonder how we should live through next winter. The cell is barren save several large iron rings set into the walls to which an unruly inmate could be chained. In the dim and hazy light, I can see that some of the other cells contain narrow wooden cages where prisoners lay trapped, unable to move; what could a girl possibly do to warrant such treatment? All the stories were true, and worse. In the cell directly opposite mine, there is a device made up of iron bands that clamp around the victim's neck, chest, and arms, keeping her pinned to the wall, trapped within what could only be described as an iron skeleton. Some of the inhabitants of these cells are indeed quite frightening to look at, being rather more unkempt than the girls in Ward A, for they are not bathed regularly here, and spend their days lying in their straw and slowly dying. I pity them, but I hope to keep this cell to myself.

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I have the cell to myself no longer, but have been invaded by a welcome guest. Earlier this afternoon, there was a fuss in the corridor. I went to the bars and saw Veronica being led by a chain attached to a collar around her neck, just like that which I had worn when I was first delivered to the Asylum. Veronica's hands were bound behind her back, but, despite her degrading circumstance, she walked proudly, sauntering almost, and taunting the young Chaser who walked in front of her, holding the chain. It came as no surprise to me that she was also completely naked save her striped stockings.

"Oh, come on now, Charlie, you strapping steed, turn 'round! What are you afraid of?"

The Chaser jerked the chain and Veronica stumbled forward, shouting, "Oh, Charlie! Yes! Pull me harder!"

They continued down the corridor, Veronica kicking out her long legs and calling playfully to the imprisoned girls on either side.

Reaching my cell, the Chaser unlocked the door and shoved the still shouting Veronica inside. He attached her chain to a ring on the wall before producing her dirty shift from his pocket and flinging it at her, ordering her to put it on. Veronica laughed hysterically at his frustration.

"Unlock my hands," she cooed, detaining the guard with her saucy eyes as he turned to exit the cell. "Charlie...Chaaaaaarlie..." The Chaser turned back to her. "Unlock my hands, Charlie boy. Come now, who wants to kiss me?"

The Chaser sighed heavily, then, with the same key he had used to unlock the cell, he released Veronica from the iron band clamped tight about her wrists. The moment she was free, out thrashed her arms, clawing at the man's face. He leapt back before any real damage could be done, and, cursing, stormed out of the cell, looking us inside.

"Works every time," said Veronica, quite satisfied with herself, as she stopped into the shift and pulled it up. "He never learns, poor thing."



"Oh, V!" I went to embrace her but was defied by her bulky collar and chain. "What's this all about then?" I asked. "You've been advancing through the ranks, I see."

"It's perfectly marvelous what's happened!" Veronica gripped my shoulders. "I must always be chained now because I am 'a danger to myself and others'. I feel terribly important."

"What do you mean, V? What's wrong with you?" I began to think that this place was finally getting to her.

"I am a nymphomaniac," she announced with pride.

"What's a 'nymphomaniac'?"

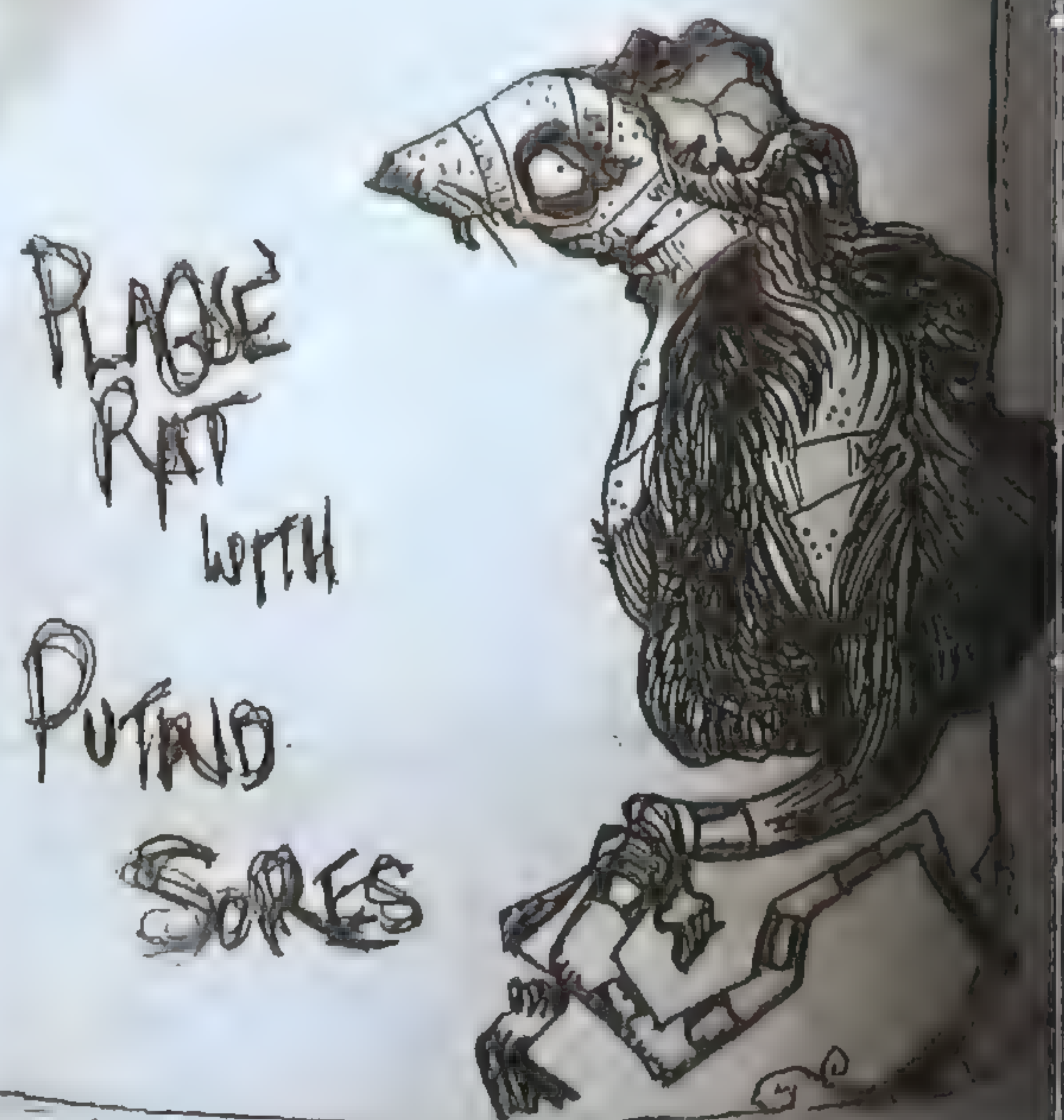
"Well, I don't know exactly, but it sounds delicious, don't you think?"

I studied Veronica closely as she busied herself with braiding her long dark hair into numerous thin plaits. She began weaving bits of straw into the plaits. I went to sit upon the ground behind her and did my best to smooth the hair she was quickly tangling.

"They're letting me go tomorrow, Emmy...you can come to visit me at the theatre. I'll see that you get into the show without paying a penny...I can do that, you know. They love me there, they really do. I can do what I like...been doing what I like since they took me on at fourteen you know. Truly love, you won't pay a cent."

I wrapped my arms around Veronica.

"Thank you, darling," I said.



## Asylum Letter No. XXIV

During what was left of the day and much of the night, I have fallen in and out of a feverish slumber full of shapeless phantoms and watery visions, and I know that my miscarriage has left me unwell. I had not known it was coming, but I am not surprised; it happened to one or the other of us girls quite often; we are not fit to sustain life within us -- we have barely enough for ourselves. I am glad to have it ended by nature rather than at the hands of a visiting surgeon with rusty tools and careless hands. Some things are so much simpler here than they are in the world outside. If only everything in life could be narrowed down to two clear and tangible options, with nothing in between to muddy it all up...to be or not to be...

As I lie in the black with my thoughts, I hear a sort of creaking -- quiet, and very far away. It could be the squeak of a rat from within the walls, but the sound is too repetitive for that. It grows louder, closer, and finally I recognize it as being the sound of wheels grinding on the gravel drive outside. This is accompanied by the clicking of hooves. The noise approaches until it seems to be passing just below our window. I rise from my straw to look out, and see an open cart being pulled by a hackneyed old horse. Even from far above, I can detect a dark figure perched at the front of the cart, the heavy contents of which are covered with a cloth. The clock in the Entrance Hall downstairs strikes four. Morning, but still dark, the moon shines down upon the courtyard, casting a bright, cold light upon the scene. I watch the cart until it turns the corner of the building and I can see it no more. As the sound of the wheels grows ever more distant, my awareness turns to the frantic muttering coming from the cells around me. Someone begins to shriek, high-pitched and panicked. Veronica raises herself slightly.

"Ladies, please!" she shouts.

"It's four o'clock in the morning...where was that cart going at this hour?" I ask her.

"If tonight is just like every other night, to a ditch, a hole...somewhere in the field behind the Asylum."

"A ditch? Why? What for?"

But, even now, I know.

"That was the Death Cart." Veronica lay back down with a sigh. "It transports the bodies of the girls who die each day to be buried in the ditch each night. No, not the bodies, that's wrong...what did she say it was...the Pits! Yes, the Death Pits. I heard it for the first time last night when you were out like a stone. After you left, they shut down the Gallery. I was brought up here and put into a holding cell, and the girls across the corridor told me all about it. It's the worst part of being in Ward B, they say. You always think it's going to be someone you know. Last night, I thought it might have been you. You had quite a close call, didn't you..."

"It comes every night?"

"People die every day."

In truth, I had often wondered where they took our dead. I had hoped that the bodies were resting in a churchyard somewhere, hidden away of course, but buried with some version of dignity. And all this time, the Death Cart had been making its ghastly rounds. It didn't pass by the side of the Asylum housing Ward A, and so I had never heard it before.



From the cell next to Veronica's and mine, a girl is sniffing. She is repeating the name "Sarah." "Sarah...Sarah...Sarah..."

"Oh God, Penny, it wasn't bleedin' Sarah," says Veronica, without raising her head. "I saw her myself as she was led to her royal bedchamber tonight."

"She could have died in her cell," whimpers Penny.

"For the last time, it wasn't Sarah, so please shut it. I'm going home tomorrow and I need my beauty rest."

"You're always going home tomorrow, V," comes another voice, one I recognize from Ward A. "You've been going home tomorrow for the past three years, so why don't you shut it and leave Penny alone? You're not going anywhere. None of us are."

Veronica says nothing; she is still, then turns to face the wall. The ward is quiet again, and I can hear Veronica whispering to herself as though half asleep.

"I'm going home...I'm going home...I'm going home..."



*Death Cart*



## Asylum Letter No. XXV

I will never forget the night I first saw the stripes writhing on the walls of my cell in Ward A. The young girl, the first inmate to speak to me in the Asylum, had told me that there were ghosts here, and she was right. They are everywhere...passing through our cells at midnight, strolling by the breakfast table, bruises covering their grey faces, their eyes scorching their very sockets. I heard them before I saw them. They are especially present in Quarantine where so many inmates have died -- forgotten by the staff, forgotten by the world outside. Their despairing wails echo through the Asylum still: "Let me out!" they cry. The prisoners of the past have not left this place; they are still bound, and death has not freed them. It is this, not the spirits, that frightens us; shall we never be free, even after we die?

We are haunted too by the specters of the rats who were killed here, the subjects of cruel experiments, sliced open whilst they lived, just as we are by the visiting abortionists. These animal spirits swim through the empty space like serpents, blank and empty-eyed with claws outstretched, or like strands of grey smoke, unfurling in the corners where the crooked walls meet the crumbling ceiling, or twisting their long and wispy tails through the window bars in the moonlight. It is a terrible aspect of our lives here, not because it is frightening, but because it is so desperately sad.

I myself am not afraid of ghosts; I am afraid of people.





## Asylum Letter No. XXVI

During our time in the Ophelia Gallery, new inmates had been given our places in Ward A, and, thus, when we returned to the world of rotten food and daily abuse, it was to Ward B. In this particular case, the move was not done to punish us, but out of necessity; the staff had to put us somewhere, and, in Ward B, they could shove as many of us into a cell as would fit, for, unlike Ward A, we had no beds to consume and divide the acreage. I suppose that being moved to Ward B was our tradeoff for the "privilege" of being an Opheliac; had we not been pretty, we would have our beds still. Thank you, parents...thank you, God...

The days are gray and gloomy, the sun having forfeited its place in the sky to the vultures that can be seen swooping in and out of the fog that rolls in from the city below. Often, the great birds disappear in the direction that the Death Cart travels each night, around the side of the building to where I cannot see. I know there is a field there, bordered by the forest of barren black trees that surrounds the Asylum on three sides, and it is in this field that I suppose the vultures must find food of some sort, for I hear them hissing and screeching, their signature steam engine growl reaching all the way up to my ears through the open window. I refuse to consider the possibility of what they could be fighting over...

In Ward A, we had been given "gate time" of a few hours daily to walk around the communal Ward Hall, in addition to Sunday afternoons in the Walking Yard. There, we could socialize while getting much needed exercise. In Ward B, however, we are always on lockdown, and are only allowed time in the Ward Hall if a Chaser is feeling kind, is dead drunk and has thus forgotten to lock us back into our cells, or simply doesn't care either way. We are never allowed outside unless it is to the Bathing Court which few of us are permitted to visit, most being chained, and so our skins are deathly pale, and the blue veins running through our bodies are clearly visible, a trait many fine ladies outside would envy, and do indeed emulate through the use of expensive cosmetics, drawing veins upon their skins where there are none. Hal For lack of other employment, I am mostly in the habit of sitting in my corner upon my pile of straw, leaning against the wall with my knees to my chest for warmth, watching the changing sky through the bars, and writing nonsense. Thank heaven for Veronica; my exhibitionistic cellmate has been valiently attempting to teach me her favourite Vaudeville acts. I oblige her, and even enjoy learning to dance like a strumpet, removing my stockings with a bit of flash (keeping the key ever tied above my knee hidden, of course). Still, I often wish simply to be alone with my thoughts, for my spirits are plummeting all the time. I must collect my energies or lose myself altogether.

Because our madness is considered to be more acute, the "cures" for all inmates of Ward B are even more brutal than those I had previously endured, if such can be imagined. There seems no end to the variety of treatments imposed upon us. I envision the doctors staying up at night, conjuring countless new methods to be tried and tested upon us the following day. Were any of these treatments effective at curing anything at all, the doctors should be praised for their tireless commitment to our rehabilitation. As they are not, one wonders why they should exert themselves on our behalves, unless it be entirely for their own pleasure.

"Get thee to a nunnery," says Prince Hamlet, Shakespeare's famous Dane. They say I am here for my own protection, but, slight as I am, I would take my chances outside, worldly dangers be damned.

The staff does not ask why we, the latest tenants of Ward B, have been transferred to begin with, and so they do not know that we are only here because there weren't any vacancies in Ward A following our brief absence. We don't bother to tell them, of course, because everybody claims they shouldn't be here, excepting Veronica that is,

who still seems to delight in her newly diagnosed nymphomania.

Every night, I lay my beaten body down and wait for the inevitable. It is more awful to fall asleep and be awakened by the creaking of the Death Cart than it is to simply stay awake, counting the minutes until four o'clock, and waiting to rest until it is all over. It's funny: simply say the words "four o'clock" anywhere in England and everyone's first thought is of high tea and crumpets. How differently I have come to think of that hour!

NOTE: I have begun to hear the grinding of the wheels even during the day, when the Cart is nowhere near. I also find myself counting heads at breakfast each morning. It could be any one of us, at any time, and there are so many ways to die...

Imagine if you're afraid of the shadows, as most people are, and of what may lurk therein.

Now, imagine what you might find were you to find yourself residing somewhere like outer space—somewhere made of nothing but shadows.

When everything is a shadow, there is no where to go to get out of the shadows.

Could you live like this?

## About Vultures: Scavengers of the Sky

Vultures smell bad. The vulture has no voicebox, thus, no birdcall, but, when angry, it makes a sound very much like a steam engine. All the time that vultures are soaring over an area, they are searching for the scent of decay that will lead them to food. As scavengers of the newly dead, vultures are little different from grave robbers and corpse buyers. When aloft, vultures flap their wings very infrequently, giving them their eerie, suspended appearance. The vulture's bald head enables it to plunge into a gory carcass and emerge relatively clean. A group of vultures circling in the air is called a "kettle." (Wouldn't a "kettle" of crows and a "murder" of vultures make more sense here?) A flock of vultures is also called a "wake" (for obvious reasons, and quite humorous, I think). Like its ancestor, the prehistoric raptor, the vulture is silent until it attacks.



Asylum Letter No. XXVII

The shaving of the Captain's head had made a profound impact upon the girls of both wards as word spread of the shocking scene. Every girl wonders if it could happen to her, for our hair is all we have left.

A few days earlier, I had suggested that we ought to do something nice for the Captain, to welcome her back once she was released from Quarantine. I had the idea that we might all donate a bit of our own hair, since she no longer had any. I have not told this to the girls, but I believe that the fallen hair, the hair that had led the maids, as well as Madame Mournington, to assume that the Captain had some disease of the scalp and must be shaved, was not, in fact, the Captain's hair at all. Indeed, it was a similar colour and the texture was the same, but I suspected that the locks had been added to her own, that they might be something more...commemorative, something worn rather like the hair jewelry that I find somewhat morbid, but which is so very popular amongst England's mourners. Hair jewelry is crafted from the locks of a deceased loved one, which are collected after death but prior to burial, and woven into impossibly intricate designs. Even Madame Mournington wore a brooch at her throat made of such braided hair, and I can only suppose it must have come from the head of her deceased daughter, if there is any truth to the rumour, that is. I base my belief about the Captain's lost hair on my observation that, when the hair came loose, it left no obvious bald patches behind, but seemed simply to fall away as though it had never actually been attached. Perhaps it was indeed a form of madness that compelled her to collect stray strands and hide them within her own, but, as it was clearly of such great importance to her, the cause did not matter to me.

The girls were willing, and so it was decided between us that the most practical way to go forth would be for each girl to cut off a bit of her hair, which we could then weave together into one long braid. There was, of course, the matter of how to sever the hair from our heads, but the Plague Rats offered to assist, and used their blade-edged incisors to gnaw off the small amount required from each inmate. I began with my own hair; once I had a thin red braid measuring the length of my arm, Veronica wove her long dark strands into my braid and continued it. We kept hold of one end of the rope as Sir Edward took the other end in his teeth and carried it through the bars to the neighboring cell. It was in this way that the braid grew in length, weaving in and out of the bars from cell to cell, a silken cord of many colours. When the last girl had added her bit from the far end of the corridor, I reeled the completed rope back into my cell, coiled it, and hid it inside the little rat hole in the corner that was already inhabited by Suffer, my cherished pink bear, which the League had carried back to me after I had been forced to leave it, along with my other hidden treasures, inside my mattress in Ward A when I was removed to the Ophelia Gallery. Thankfully, the rats had been good enough to bring my silver pencil as well, for, had they not, this narrative would have ended abruptly. Closing the hole with straw, I intended to guard the braid as best I could until the Captain was released back to us.

As it happened, we had not long to wait. Only a few days later, we were marched through the Ward Hall after breakfast and found the Captain sitting at her usual spot before the window. She was almost unrecognizable; her hair was still closely cropped, having only begun to grow back, and her scalp showed open sores where it had been rubbed raw by a dull razor. She was thinner than ever, and her protruding spine was hunched over as though she had not the strength to hold herself upright. The Captain's eyes were bandaged to protect them from the light after weeks in the pitch black of Quarantine. Upon seeing her, the girls squealed in elated surprise, but the Captain clapped her hands over her ears; she had not heard voices in such a long time that her senses were stunned by the sudden presence of them. I hushed the girls and went to retrieve the braid; approaching the Captain's stool, I gently took her hand so as not to frighten her. I ran the braid over her open palm, and she closed her fingers around it.



## Hospital Entry 20: ELECTROCONVULSIVE THERAPY

I have spent my life trying to stay out of Electroconvulsive Therapy, a.k.a. Electric Shock Treatment. It's not pretty, they say. It's not even humane. But they also say that it works. Much like Lithium, however, the doctors have no idea why it works. And it really doesn't matter because, by the time you go in for ECT, you have nothing left to lose. It is the last chance of the suicidally depressed -- one step before the end -- and you'll only get that chance if you happen to be institutionalized at the time, which is not likely to be the case for most suicidally depressed people, most of whom can't even get out of bed. During one of my past depressive episodes, I remember not brushing my teeth for two weeks because it was just too much effort. It wasn't that I didn't want to do it, or that I was too lazy to do it -- I couldn't do it. But, back to ECT: Think of it like chemotherapy; many cancer patients feel that the treatment is worse than the death they will inevitably face if they don't get the treatment. I have never undergone ECT, though it has been recommended to me several times in the past. I have only smelled the terror rising in those who are led down that path.

Three weeks ago, I entered my communal bedroom to find a new inmate sitting on the bed next to mine. She was clearly anorexic (she even admitted it), but still pretty, with short black hair in a somewhat androgynous cut, which, as an asexual, I particularly liked. The girl was reading a book about ECT, one of many she had on the subject stacked upon her bed. She did not look up when I came in. I understood this perfectly; when coexisting with the clinically depressed, one must get used to being greeted one day and ignored the next -- it is all part of the isolation process that this fucked up species go through, and I am no exception. There are some days when I simply cannot speak. There are a lot of days like that, actually. And, despite my social criticisms of the general approach towards the mentally ill, I do pity the friends of the severely depressed. The silences lasting for months, the lack of excitement (or, worse, the feigned excitement) at your new boyfriend/baby/job/apartment, the absence of a return phone call or to R.S.V.P. to your wedding invitation...yes, if you've got such a friend, there will inevitably be a point when you will simply have to let them go and trust that, someday, they'll come back. Unless of course you really, really love them, in which case you won't leave them alone for a minute, although they will resent this, because they want to be alone. Despite faking it for the comfort of others most of the time, there are months out of the year when I cannot help but isolate myself, and so I am aware that I will be apologizing constantly for the rest of my life; it is a horrible feeling.

I asked a nurse about my new roommate that afternoon. She told me that the girl's name was Chloe, and that she was scheduled to go in for ECT on the following morning. The nurse warned me that Chloe didn't talk to anyone, and that I shouldn't be offended when Chloe didn't talk to me.

When I went to my room that night, drugged but no longer reacting to the drugs, I lay awake in the blackness, waiting for the morning alarm to sound just as I always did. Then, Chloe spoke to me. I was not surprised -- I knew that she would.

"You're Emilie, right?"

"Yeah."

"I'm Chloe. I just wanted to tell you that, at four o'clock tomorrow morning, the nurses are going to come in and take me to ECT. I wanted to say I'm sorry, 'cause you'll probably wake up with all the noise."

"Oh lord, don't even worry about that, Chloe. It's more than likely I'll be awake anyway. Four o'clock is the witching hour for manic depressives."

"OK, thanks."

Silence. And then it came.

"I'm really, really scared."

I told Chloe about the session I'd once had with my psychiatrist during which he'd told me all about ECT. He had said that the process worked wonders on people who simply hadn't responded to medication of any kind. I told her that he had also said it didn't hurt at all, and that it really wasn't so bad, which was a lie -- the shrink had never said anything of the kind. In fact, he had described how brutal, how painful, and how ineffective the treatment often was, but I didn't see the point in relaying that bit of information. I asked Chloe why the doctors felt she needed ECT in the first place.

"I'm just really depressed, and I can't function anymore. I can't do anything, and I can't make the depression go away."

"Did anything happen to trigger your depression?"

"No, nothing. I just...got sad. I can't go back home because I'll just lie in bed all day and cry. Nothing has helped, and the doctors don't know what else to do. I want to get the treatment -- people say I don't want to get better, but I really do. I wasn't always like this, you know. I actually used to be a really happy person. I don't want to be this way, but I'm still really scared. I've read all these books about ECT, but they haven't made me feel any better. Oh god, I am so scared..."

Chloe began to cry.

"Listen to me, Muffin," I said, determined to pull her back from the ledge she was fast approaching, the ledge that is more dangerous than any treatment one could possibly endure. "You are going to be OK. In fact, you are going to be better than OK. You are going to go into that ECT room tomorrow, and you are going to kick ECT's ass. You are going to be so tough, and so strong, and so OK, and I will tell you why: because I need you to be OK. I need you to come back and tell me that it was fine, and easy, and that you feel better, because someday I will need to get ECT, and I'm going to be scared, and so I need you to be OK so that you can tell me that it's OK. Can you do that for me?"

"Yes."

Chloe calmed down and began to talk more freely, just as any normal person would who wasn't about to get her brain violently shocked into oblivion. She asked me why I had been committed, and, this time, I could tell the story like it really was. Chloe had never attempted suicide and couldn't imagine doing so, even as depressed as she was. She thought it was sad that I had to go through this alone, a fact that seemed as though no one else had even noticed. At least her family supported her, she said, and was waiting for her to come home as soon as she possibly could. They hadn't given up on her. I was beyond being jealous -- I have no real feelings anymore. I am growing more anesthetized with every passing day, and it terrifies me. Will the numbness go away once I get out of here? And what if it doesn't? Will I ever be able to create again?

"Do you feel like being here is helping you?" Chloe asked.

"God no. If anything, it's making me worse. I have to fake that I'm all right all the time just to get through the day. Everyone is flipping out around me, and I refuse to give in to that. Observing the freak show only forces me to stay collected."

"But have you tried just being open? Letting yourself 'flip out' if you need to? That's what we're all here for -- to let it out, to be completely natural in a safe place. It might actually help you."

"That's the problem though. This isn't a safe place."

Had Chloe stayed in this ward for more than one night, she would have known that. But I didn't want to defend myself, and I didn't want to argue. And besides, she was right. We are here to give it all up -- to be naked, open, free of the social constraints and even free of the laws that demand that we contain ourselves. Not but



people, not throw things, which is ironic because, for many of us, it was the law that demanded that we be here in the first place. But I could never put down my shield as the other inmates do, and no wonder -- I never feel safe; most of the others are either too witless to feel the danger, or else they are the cause of it. And maybe it all makes more sense than I had thought: Take a suicidal girl and put her in a war zone -- some place where she can think of nothing but survival just to get through breakfast. Maybe there's method in this madness after all.

Chloe and I didn't sleep that night. We talked about everything from what kind of music I made, to the goth clubs in L.A. that she used to go to when she had been happy. I told her that I always ended up dancing on a table, and she told me that she always ended up taking off her shirt. At four o'clock, the nurses came. Chloe got out of bed, and so did I. She was shaking. I held her tightly and told her that I loved her. She told me she loved me too. Then, Chloe switched off; she put her head down, went limp, and let the nurses fold her into the wheelchair they had brought to take her away.

Once Chloe was gone, I tore the corner of the previous day's Asylum letter into the shape of a heart, because, frankly, that's the sort of thing that girls never grow out of when it comes to each other, and, on the heart, I wrote her a note. I told her that, soon, when she got out of here, she was to go directly to the club we had talked about. There, I wrote, she would find me dancing on a table, and she'd better be prepared to take her shirt off.

I never saw Chloe again.



## Asylum Letter No. XXVIII

There has been a shortage of leeches imported from France, their primary breeding ground, and so the Asylum must be more frugal in its use of the creatures. The salt murders have been replaced by other practices no less barbaric.

To begin with, the leeches are now used several times over, and so may live long and useful lives, which would be lovely for all were it not for some blatantly unsanitary aspects of this leech-sharing that seem bloody obvious to me, but are entirely unapparent to Dr. Lymer. For example, the blood sucked from one girl is inevitably mixed with the blood of the next. Now, not that I know much of medicine, but it seems to me that, if the blood is the carrier of all our ills, would we really be wise to spread it around between us? In addition, the leeches are encouraged to consume more blood than they naturally would care to, thereby reducing the amount of leeches needed for each patient. In order to allow the leech to keep drinking, the Doctor does one of two things: He either presses the body of the poor thing, forcing it to vomit up everything it has just ingested and causing it to start back at the beginning, or he makes easy work of it by cutting off the tail so that the blood can flow directly through the body and out the other end, leaving it eternally feeding, yet never satiated.

Thus, we lose more blood than ever, and are traumatized by the gruesome treatment of the creatures we have grown rather fond of, as illustrated by the fact that many of the leeches have been given names. Some girls even fancy that the leeches speak to them, and can often be heard talking to their pets affectionately as they drink. It surely will not surprise you to know that I am one of those girls, and that my favorite leech is called Mr. Wigglesworth. The leeches never speak in complete sentences, and most only utter a word or two between bites, but they have evidenced distinct personalities. I find them to be a gloomy, neurotic sort, but then what would you be if you were stuck in a jar all day just waiting around to be fed, and then had your lower bits chopped off for the pleasure? Funny...painted in those terms, their lives sound rather like ours... I wonder if the leeches have always been communicative and we are only just now noticing it, or if there is something in our blood that is causing the insects to develop strangely. There is a third possibility, of course -- perhaps we are simply going mad en masse.

Not all of the girls share this affection, however, and there have been several cases of the Doctor taking things just a bit too far. We have among us a girl in Ward B who once suffered dreadfully from night terrors, waking herself, and us, with screaming. Master detective that he is, Dr. Lymer had deduced that the source of the girl's madness lay within her throat, causing her to scream so. He had a brilliant solution to extract this "throat madness": Holding the victim's jaws open with the aid of metal clamps, Dr. Lymer tied a length of thread around the body of a leech, then lowered it into the girl's mouth. He secured the loose end of the thread by tying it around one of her teeth, and then left the leech to attach itself to the inside of her throat. Not surprisingly, the girl soon went into a state of mental and physical shock. When Dr. Lymer returned hours later, the girl's body was shivering and cold as death; though her eyes were open wide, she was unresponsive. Dripping with blood that spattered the patient's frozen face, the leech was finally extracted, and the girl carried to the Hydro Chamber where she was plunged into a tub of near boiling water and then into one of icy water in turns until she regained her senses, but she was never the same. Dr. Lymer considered his patient quite cured, for the girl never screamed again. Neither has she spoken a word since.

What I would very much like to know is this: If a leech sucks the madness out of a girl, does that render the leech mad?















Asylum Letter No. XXIX

Much of what Dr. Stockill does in his laboratory all day long remains something of a mystery to me. I know that he is mixing his chemicals and composing our "medicines," our sleeping pills, our purges, our injections, our strangely coloured tonics, yet I also know that there is something more than that.

The Superintendent is always watching us. When we are out in the Bathing Court, I never fail to spot him looking down at us from his laboratory window high up above the wards. He rarely visits the wards during the day, instead calling us to his laboratory for "treatments." But there has been a change. When we are locked up for the night, Dr. Stockill is often heard stalking the corridors, his step slow and deliberate like his speech, shining his torch into our cells with all the covertness of a grave robber. There, he searches for, and snatches away, any girl that suits his unknown purpose.

The inmates that the Doctor selects never return to the wards, though it took us some time to find this out for certain; the Asylum is such a large institution, with two massive wards and several floors filled with cells that an inmate might be transferred to, a girl could be anywhere, or nowhere. We only became aware of the deadliness of the situation when, one morning, on our way down to the Bathing Court, we witnessed the bodies of several recently disappeared inmates being hastily removed from Dr. Stockill's laboratory by a bevy of Chasers. The dead girls were covered in bloody legions, their faces twisted in anguish almost beyond recognition; they had not died peacefully. No, there is no doubt of it -- being selected by Dr. Stockill is a girl's last stop.

What does he want?

I have watched him with the other doctors -- not only with Dr. Lymer, but also with our visiting surgeons who perform the necessary removal of things that are not...wanted. Dr. Stockill feels superior to them -- I can see that. He is disgusted by their vulgar methods -- I can see that too. And yet, he approves of what they do. Does he really approve? Or does it simply not concern him? No, I cannot believe that he cares a bit what the others do with us just so long as it does not interfere with his experiments, nor do I believe that he cares a whit what is done with us once these experiments are carried out and we are no longer of use to him. We supply him with a ready store of bodies -- that is all. He may select one of his desired age, desired race, eye colour, build, and so forth, and then test whatever it is he is testing, something I desperately wish I knew. Or do I?

Do you remember the day I was first introduced to the Superintendent? I had spotted a shiny object in his cabinet, behind the bottle of green liquid, and, while I did not know what the object was at the time, I have since learned, and learned well, for I have seen the Doctor use it a hundred times already. The thing is a sort of fleam, but not at all like the rude varieties that Dr. Lymer is so fond of. No indeed, this elegant weapon is like nothing I have ever seen; designed to rest gently in the palm of the hand, the silver shaft is engraved with intricate designs encircling the Doctor's monogram, "M.S." Now for the interesting bit: When a hidden latch on the end of the silver handle is triggered, a series of spring-loaded blades shoot out from the select a blade from the assortment and fold the others away. Numbering seven in total, each blade is different from the next. One is thin and double-edged, with a blunted tip like a shaving razor; another resembles the fleams I have known before, with a pointed chisel protruding from the blade. Still another has a winding screw at the tip, while another is curved like a hook at the end. This exquisite instrument seems to combine all the necessities for ordinary operations, but in miniature form, and, as I have determined, in a form that Dr. Stockill can find palatable, such is its violence.

yet feminine delicacy (both traits that we combine so well). This device has been applied to my flesh thrice thus far, for though he seems sickened to do it, it is sometimes necessary for our venerated Doctor to cut our flesh in order to deposit his chemical concoctions directly into our bloodstream, or to test the speed of our healing, or the severity of inevitable infection. I believe that the beauty of his tool makes the act bearable to him, though whether it is our blood or simply us that disgust him so, I cannot tell.

In stark contrast, Dr. Lymer delights in watching our blood flow -- he makes no secret of it. In the demeanor of the visiting doctors, there is always a relish with which they perform their operations that is monstrous, yes, but there is something right in that: A mad man does a mad thing and he madly enjoys it. But not our celebrated Superintendent; I have never seen him show an ounce of sorrow, nor of joy. I cannot read him, and that is what frightens me. I am not the only one who has noticed the unmistakable smell of death that seems to follow Dr. Stockill wherever he goes; stranger still, the odor is not present when the Doctor is visible, but permeates the air just after he departs, his scent the lasting shadow of the part of himself he tries to hide.

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I have been called into Dr. Stockill's chamber again. It is strange...though we are all subjected to the chemical experiments he administers in his laboratory upstairs, some of which sicken and others which kill, he seems to call me, and me alone, into his chamber downstairs, only to speak to me in his impenetrably phlegmatic manner, as though my thoughts were worth anything, for, after all, I am a lunatic.

"Tell me, Emily, with no last name, are you suffering here in the Asylum?"

"I'm sorry, Doctor?"

"It is a simple question which demands a simple answer: Are you suffering?"

"Only as much as the rest, Doctor."

"And do you still think of death? Of taking your own life, I mean?"

"It is in me now, Doctor. Since I attempted it all that time ago, the possibility has never left me. It is as if...as if a door had opened, showing me another option -- an option unthinkable to most, it seems. I dare say that door will never entirely close, and, even if it should, it certainly will never lock again"

"And you do not choose that option, yet you say you suffer."

"We are well guarded, Doctor."

"Others have managed it."

"I am afraid to leave those that would remain."

I wished I had not said that last. My fear was merely another tool for Dr. Stockill to wield against me.

"Why should you care for them? They are the filth that paved the streets."

"Why should they care for me? I am no better. And yet they do."

"You would endure this suffering for the company of whores?"

"I would, Doctor."

I know, Diary, that my life hangs in the balance every time I stand before him, and provide him with what I can only pray are the right answers. Should I not wonder what he wants, what would become of me? He is a dangerous person, and he prizes value on human life, nor life of any kind, if the buckets of dead, the... that the Chasers remove from his laboratory each morning are any indication.

...one information source, and I am...  
...one information source, and I am...



## Hospital Entry 24: CREDIBILITY

It is impossibly easy to get committed -- getting out is the hard part.

Most of the inmates here either see Jesus or think they are Jesus. And me? Well, I only find letters from a parallel universe waiting for me in my notebook every morning -- a universe that is becoming ever more indiscernible from my own. I am even beginning to forget whether my name is spelled with an "ie" or a "y".

Worse, I feel a manic state rising within me, and every day I feel an ever greater desire to cut myself. Ah, cutting...isn't cutting something that attention-starved teenagers do, an act that lies within that fuzzy gray area between a cry for help and a desperate attempt to look dangerous, and, therefore, cool? So, how in the fuck did I end up locking myself in the bathroom several times a day, razorblade in hand? Which bathroom it was didn't seem to matter to me -- home, coffee shops, friend's houses, they were all more than sufficient. I have never taken a drug that wasn't prescribed; I have never smoked a cigarette; I have never been addicted to anything except the sight of my own blood and the pain that comes with it.

The thing that nobody but my shrink seems to understand is that the behavior is not the cause of the illness -- it is the result of it. I believe I understood this concept long before I experienced it within myself, so why is it so implausible to everyone else? Perhaps my background lends itself to a heightened awareness of self-abuse as self-medication; good god, I've been in rock bands with the world's most notorious drug addicts; my father was a raging alcoholic; on and on it goes. And yet, in none of these instances were the self-abusers fucked up because they did drugs, because they drank; they were drunks and druggies because they were fucked up to begin with.

Now, I know that it is extremely commonplace to confuse the symptom with the disease. Perhaps it is the desire in people to look for the easiest, cleanest, least scary answer. Scotland Yard would call this lazy detective work, and I would agree, because I AM TELLING YOU ALL WHAT IS WRONG, AND YOU REFUSE TO ACCEPT IT! I am more self-aware than it is healthy for anyone to be -- the internal dialogue is deafening. I know precisely what is wrong with me, and I can explain it in brutal, unvarnished clarity if anyone cares to listen, but the fact is that, once you've been prescribed a psychiatric drug, you have lost all credibility, and this is before you've been committed, after which it's all over for you. You no longer know what is wrong with yourself, what is good for you yourself, or rather, you do, but society (I so hate using the word "society" here, but I can't think of an alternative) does not think so, and where is the power, my muffins? In numbers. I am only one, and I am crazy. Oh, and I'm also a girl, which never helps any situation. Children are children; lunatics are children; women are children. (This is, after all, why so many markets and pharmacies stock the feminine products right next to the baby products. Think I'm reading too much into this? Well, fuck you.) We know nothing about anything, least of all ourselves and our bodies.

I am beginning to understand what might make a mental patient smash a guitar against a nurse's booth.

# Rolling Scone

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CAUTION: VERY DANGEROUS

CUSTOM BLEND

BLOOD TYPE

BLOOD TYPE

BLOOD TYPE

GLUE

I wonder what happens when the  
ratio of food you eat to drugs you  
take is thrown off in favor of the drugs...  
For that matter, what happens when there  
are more drugs in your bloodstream  
than blood in your bloodstream?

Check back for a full report...





DRUG ○  
DIARY

APOTHECARY  
-ORDER-

- 1 dram liquid Cyanide
- 3 ounces powdered lead
- 5 pounds prime laches

*Delivered to:*  
THE  
ASYLUM  
for  
WARWICK VICTIM GIRLS

NOTE: Dearest Children, I regret to say that I found it necessary to type out the following entries in this section of Emilie's notebook rather than print them in their original form, for it seems that the young lady was too strongly medicated at the time to write legibly to the untrained eye. I was only able to untangle the jumble of characters because, living in the Asylum, I have had much practice at deciphering hieroglyphs, and, where my efforts have failed at making sense of the following, I have printed the markings as I see them, and will leave their meaning to be interpreted by the reader. I have endeavored to keep intact any handwritten sections that were at all readable.

Faithfully,

--A WATCHFUL FRIEND

*I am so confused that I can't remember how to begin a journal entry, or even how to start writing without any formalities at all.*

I almost began this entry with "Hey..." or "Dear..." and then it finally occurred to me that the pills that are making me confused are the very same that were originally prescribed to me in order to wipe my memory. Apparently, they call it the "amnesia drug" for a reason.

So, of course my taking them continuously both morning and night would be confusing...none of my thoughts are being programmed into my mind as they would normally be...even now I know that, when I look back at these words at a later hour, I will not remember having written them, and, even more importantly, what my thoughts were at the time.

This is the thing I miss in particular...not just remembering every event, but remembering every thought that took place during the event...not only the act but the thought behind it. A few weeks ago, I remembered the color of the sky on the day I went to the hospital when I was two and had leukemia, and now I can't remember what I did sixty seconds ago. I find e-mails I have written and, not only do I not remember writing them, I don't remember WHY I wrote them, and I am somewhat embarrassed by their language, which is generally too florid, too forward, and I can't take them back. Since I missed my shrink appointment last Friday (because I couldn't remember I had an appointment at all), I have run out of the Amnesia Pill, and also the pills that slow down my heart rate, the ones for Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. Yeah, I really am that fucked up. Of course, foreseeing the inevitable withdrawal, and having been warned by my doctor that coming off the Amnesia Drug was the medical equivalent of detoxing from heroin (no joke), I began taking only half of the pill, then one quarter, which brings us to today, when I took no pill in the morning, and will have, I think, the last quarter tonight. Or perhaps they are all gone...I don't know. When I called my doctor, I told him that I was all out of drugs, and, when he said that this was impossible, I thought he was the one who was losing it. Since then, I have been finding pills all over the floor and inside my pockets.



I am shaky, anxious, scared, confused, and, worse, I have not a soul to complain to. S\_\_\_\_\_ is no longer someone I can speak to or converse with upon any subject of importance. All subjects seem to lead back to THE subject, which is my cutting of myself and his disgust and revulsion at it (although I do not believe this is actually the real issue, but rather an easy target). He has said some things on the subject that are unforgivable, and yet, I am still here, and why? Because my heart re-breaks each time I think of going, even though I have spent most of everyday NOT here because I can't stand TO be here because it is so, SO uncomfortable and...sad. I have, of course, tried to go, and have made the steps toward a new house to live in, all the way to the point of sitting in a realtor's office drinking coffee from a pitifully sized Styrofoam cup -- I mean, cup (the kind that simply screams "you won't be here long," and, as such, is more like an hourglass than a vessel for caffeine, although I couldn't guess whom the hourglass is intended for because a realtor's office is not the sort of place where buyers wish to tarry). In any case, here I am, after yet another fight last night (not so much a real fight as my being insulted, attacked, accused, and forced to defend myself).

The trouble with forgiving people is that  
it makes writing terrible things about  
them so much more difficult.

Mornings are excruciating when you're depressed, because you have a whole day of gut-wrenching pain to look forward to before you can get to the night, which is even worse. Waking up earlier than S\_\_\_\_\_ this morning, I knew that I could not endure the inevitable -- an awkward "good morning" followed by silence, rudeness, and my restraining tears and dreams of suicide while he dreams of god knows what and ignores me. Best to be out of the house -- to be anywhere else. Ah! I will write a note begging for an end to the judgment and stating that I expect nothing from him, not love, not help, not even understanding, and so he has no reason to either attack or defend. That should fix everything. Right?

Though far more verbose than I had originally intended (shock!), the note is written, and I flee the house for S-bucks before S\_\_\_\_\_ wakes up. I have brought everything I could possibly need for the day, including my morning drugs, which I had fished from the bottom of a bag I don't remember using. I am sitting directly under a light that flickers just like a migraine, and, woe to the documentarian who is eaten by the tiger as she writes about his presence instead of running away, for the chair I was intending to move to upon completion of this sentence has been taken whilst I was composing it. Fie.

A Hollywood acquaintance twice my age trots on over, sits herself down opposite me, and, without asking whether she's interrupting anything (or, more likely, knowing that I would answer "no" even if she was because that's the sort of stupid fucking nice guy I am), tells me that I look GREAT!!!, and that, in her opinion (which I don't recall asking for), there is NOTHING wrong with me (word spreads fast here). She says this with a smirk and a toss of her head as if to say, "Oh, whatever you're dealing with, darling, it's really nothing." She even goes so far as to ask me what drugs

I'm on and, never one to disobey a request, I begin to list them for her. It's like an alphabet game. I get to "Lamictal -- for manic depression," and this most annoying woman waves her hands around, adjusting her purse, and nearly rising out of her chair as though she's had "just about enough." She leans over, looks directly into my eyes like an old friend or a new drunk, and says, "you do NOT have manic depression." She throws in a reassuring laugh for good measure, as if I had told her that I felt fat and she was trying to reassure me that I wasn't. "Oh, honey, you do not have manic depression," she repeats. It isn't that I want to argue with her, or to strip away a single one of her delusions, and it certainly isn't that I want to be manic depressive (I've spent most of my life pretending I wasn't because I didn't want the attention), but there was no sense in perpetuating a falsehood any longer, so protest I do. I unzip the white teddy bear bag that holds my traveling pharmacy, and hold it out to her.

"These are ALL for manic depression," I say. "This is not a joke."

I must have proven my "crazy cred," because she seems to accept this, and quickly moves on to the difference between manic depression and ordinary depression and how she has only ever had depression (as though it were something you just "get" and then get over, like a cold or a headache), in which case I wonder why in the hell she felt qualified to inform me that I wasn't bipolar, having never experienced it herself, or maybe that is why. In any case, she ended by telling me that, if I indeed had manic, then I was doing a "great job of hiding it" (don't I know it, you fucking bitch).

She is finally gone, but now not only do I feel manically depressed, I also feel homicidal.

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I have only just tonight had the courage to open the bottle of Lithium that I have had in my possession for some time now. I am quite surprised to see how pretty the pills are -- nothing like the chalky white, sharp edged tablets I am used to. No, these are a lovely pale pink with tiny brown lettering announcing to my innards what they will be dining upon while I sleep tonight. Hopefully, they will be happy with the menu.



Pink... why is everything pink?

The flyers given out at the Mental Health Center announcing an upcoming class on anger management (what if you're pissed off by pink?)...the little slips of paper I am handed by my shrink at the end of my bi-weekly appointments to remind me when my next session will be because I am too drugged out to remember on my own...all pink. Recently, I asked my shrink who it was that decided everything related to mental health should be pink -- if there was a secret, medical meaning behind the color choice, kind of like how airplanes and hospitals seem to favor blue. He didn't have an answer for me, but agreed that it was pretty fucking comical.

I'm stalling - I don't want to take these. L-I-T-H-I-U-M

Of course, to my eyes, the writing on each pill only seems to taunt me, each precious pink gem of promised sanity reminding me just how far into the madness I have gone.

Lithium. "It's just a salt," they said.

It's just a salt, though you must be sure to drink a great deal of water or else you'll die. But it's just a salt.

My wife is salt and water?

"Too much of water hast thou, poor Ophelia..."

Back to Ophelia again...will it never end?

Lithium. Lithium. Lithium.

You don't come back from Lithium.

Zoloft? Prozac? Maybe. But not Lithium. Lithium isn't for people who have bad moods. Lithium is for lifers. You're not going home after this.

Hollywood Mental Health Center  
YOUR NEXT APPOINTMENT IS:  
NAME: \_\_\_\_\_  
DATE: \_\_\_\_\_  
TIME: \_\_\_\_\_

I remember needing to finish "Opheliac" and finding the task impossible due to the bottomless depression that I was drowning in at the time. I thought of suicide constantly, and I mean constantly. I made plans. I made other plans. And then, I recall saying to myself one day, "Just finish the album, and then you can do what you like with yourself." I was bribing myself with the permission to die. Of course, the reason I bribed myself in the first place was that I hoped that, once the album was done, I wouldn't be suicidal anymore. I was making a bet, and, yes, I was bluffing, but, in that particular case, it worked. Somehow, I found a way to follow through with the deal, and I didn't run out and eat rat poison the moment the album was finished.

Now, I wish I could remember how I did it -- what it felt like. What was that moment like when I said yes to the deal? Was it made completely, or did I try to back out of it? I hope that I made the decision, shook my own hand in acceptance of the terms, and all in one quick moment. I wish this because, if I could do it then, I can do it now. Right?

Junked up on drugs, I am nodding off now, eyelids drooping, exhausted. I look a fright and I know it. I cannot write anymore but still I do simply because I am curious to see what gibberish I will compose as the medication kicks in... My writing becomes smaller and messier and seems to spiral downward into places that I don't know about... It is almost like being possessed. I look down at the journal I have been obsessively keeping, and I find page after page of words I can scarcely make out, written in a hand that is not my own, and yet, I've got ink on my fingers.

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It is the following morning, and I can barely read what I wrote last night, and that is what both fascinates and terrorizes me. Even now, I have no idea what I'm writing, and have to review the sentence I just finished in order to know where my thought started, just elljwlg, and here it is, the place where I lose my mind ffjkors and cannot discern with any degree of confidence what is a dream and what is reality...what was just a thought that found its way into my mind...I wish I could cancel my work on this new record and lose this whole month because it wasn't pretty, nothing like Lunioiwhfowl, a system that chooses what comes out wenthorywghh and what hwwijf an mourr asleep and will remember nothing tomorrow...

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Next morning from above, and I so want to read what I have written as my night-time medication kicked in, to figure out (or attempt to figure out) my insane ramblings, but I can make out nothing. I fell asleep with pen in hand, but still I am afraid to lose the million billion thoughts that are in my head right now, and I know, even at this moment, that the thoughts are flying away with every second that I wait...I'm finding, from that old ceiling view of mine, that I'm writing terribly messily (is that a word?) because I'm trying to write at one hundred m.p.h....I've never ever used that banal analogy before...



So, let's see how many worthless thoughts I can document before they fly away:

Yesterday, I saw a bee going from purple flower petal to purple flower petal...they were all wilted and crushed, lying on the sidewalk beneath the tree that shed them...they're all dead, I said to myself. They're dead, you stupid fucking bee, they're all dead! It must be a necropheliac, I thought...or would that be a necroBEEliac? Haaaaa, not funny (although I did tell this to my shrink and it was the first time I'd ever seen him laugh).

Another one: A goth punk boy was walking toward me on the stretch of sidewalk going from S-bucks back to the house, and I checked out of my body and flew up onto the ceiling again, which is now just the sky, and I watched the kid walking toward me and me walking toward him, both of us doing our little runway walks, trying to seem oblivious, but both, I'm sure, dreadfully conspicuous for doing so. We pass without a word and I laugh out loud because it is all so tragic, how we fake and puff ourselves up...

And another thought: I should become ambidextrous. I can learn anything I set my mind to, I've proven that...as I was just now thinking this, I was imagining telling it to Dr. A\_\_\_\_, which doesn't make it any less sincere a thought, but just goes to show how far out of my body I am...and now I am FURTHER out because I am imagining my telling THIS to Dr. A\_\_\_\_, and now I am even FURTHER out because I am imagining telling THIS to Dr. A\_\_\_\_, and so on to the power of infinity...

My thoughts are like a tree packed with branches, all long and spindly, but with none longer or thicker than, or distinct in any way from, the others...sanity is one heavy branch, or no, the tree trunk with a multitude of small branches going all the way up -- small, unimportant branches, or rather, all equal in importance and unimportance, and fighting each other for space inside my head.

I check my phone and see nine new text messages. They are unopened, but I cannot check them. Occasionally, I text my friends to tell them that I am OK, and to beg them to forgive my silence, but that I just don't want anyone to see how sick I am. Then, when they text me back, I can't check their replies. Technically I could, but I can't, which therefore shows (isn't "therefore" one of those words that one can choose to spell with or without the "E" at one's own discretion? And what madness is this that we can choose to spell words one way or another? Now THAT is insane...and even in the case of British words containing "U" that we in the States ignore, even that, how is that possible? How can we choose, because of the difference of a few miles of water, how can we simply CHOOSE to spell a word that is part of the same language differently?...what does it therefore show? I've forgotten... And

my hand hurts from my death grip on the pen, and I'm not breathing and my body is tense, and my head is tight, and I'm still not breathing, and I am writing fast and messy and I know that the moment I put down this pen and stop writing I have to make a choice, and...a personal message from a dog is sacred and I would be damned if I ignored it...perhaps if I ignored it, I would stop receiving message from dogs altogether, and that would be awful...I can't risk it...I need to find out where the phrase, "lo and behold" comes from...thoughts rushing in, pen grasped in pain, not breathing, calm down, the thoughts won't go away...I'm back, I'm trying to write as slowly and as neatly as I can possibly manage, almost as if I were writing calligraphy...I am amazed to see how sincerely glad my friends seem to be to hear from me...I feel unworthy of their love...they are better friends to me than I am to them, without a doubt...the thoughts are rushing in and I feel as though I have a balloon filled with 4th of July sparklers that is ready to explode inside my chest...I want to be a firework, to live my life blindingly bright and sparkling, and then to go out quickly...to burn for a short time, but very brightly...could I possibly be in a manic state and not know it simply because of all the unhappiness around me? Put me in a safe, secure place, surrounded by friends (but not too many please), and erase the heartbreak and loneliness and guilt...would I be manically dancing on tables all night? Pen grasping, stop, deep breath, put the book down...put it down...put it down...

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I am writing lines that separate the above entry from this one as though they represent the days between the entries, but it is futile because I don't know how many days it has been, and so a messy splashing of lines will do as well as any other thing to convey that there has passed "a certain amount of time," but not enough time, very unfortunately, to find me at the winning end of my withdrawal from the Amnesia Drug. I think that the constant battles with the symptoms are wearing on me far more than I first realized. I thought I would bravely be able to withstand the "jitters" as long as I knew that they were gradually going away, but the accumulative effect of what now seems like endless days of shaking and supposed "recovery" now takes on the tone of Chinese water torture...what's the harm in a little water, right, Ophelia? Just in case we needed any fresh example of how I am thus affected, it has taken me approximately thirty minutes to write the last three sentences. Looking back at the speed with which I have been able to fill the last hundred pages, it is a sad thing to see the same pen halting after every half-sentence and suspended in midair as its mistress ponders everything and nothing until she can pull it together just enough to lower the nib to the page again.

All of the pain that is in my heart, all of the anguish in my tortured brain, to speak nothing of the health of my soul, and I've just wasted half a page on formalities and gibberish. Where am I...it pains me more than I can describe to say it, but I am here, surrounded by people and a burgeoning career, and yet at the



loneliest point in my life. It seems incredible to me that this is even possible after all that I have lived through and died through to get to this day. But, even at my worst, my most dangerous, in all of the past I have had someone who cared enough about me to pay me a visit, to offer some unwanted advice (G\_\_\_\_\_ with his prescription of no alcohol for example, HA!), to let me know in some small way that I was not entirely, completely, utterly alone. Not this time.

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I am in Europe now, and have not been able to receive my medication shipment here because the fucking Nazi border patrol won't let it into the country. And why? They think I'm going to sell it.

*I have not had my drugs for over two weeks. That is a death sentence equivalent.*

During this time, my primary concerns have been the physical effects of withdrawal -- the dizziness, the nausea, loss of equilibrium, and complete misery both mentally and physically. I have already stopped taking the Amnesia Drug because I have to perform and I can't perform when I can't get off the floor because I have amnesia as to how one might do such a thing.

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I used to have a photographic memory...but not after Atavan (the Amnesia Drug). Having been off of it for about three weeks now, I am no longer quite so incoherent, and I can remember my own name again, but I am certainly not the way I used to be -- I'm not anywhere close. I have always wished for the ability to forget, to let harsh memories soften over time, something that seems so easy for so many. But let that be a lesson to me! Be careful what you wish for when there's a doctor nearby who just might be able to grant that wish -- it never works out quite the way you think it will. When they said, "This will make you forget some of the bad things that have happened to you," I thought, "Bring it on, motherfuckers!" But it didn't happen like that. I still remember every pain I've ever experienced. I just feel stupider now.

Now, with my prescriptions still being held up at border patrol, all of the drugs are out of my system just enough to once again see what lies beyond the medication, though I know very well that the path leads back into hell. I stand peering over the gate, and everything looks...different. I am seized by fear and panic, fear of nothing and of everything, of leaving the room to step into the unlit hallway outside, to open a door, to look out a window, for every door threatens to reveal something awful lurking behind it, and every uncurtained window pane exists to display the ghostly visages that will surely appear, faces just waiting for me to pass by so that they can press themselves against the glass, screaming both in terror and to terrorize. I know it. But am I not the one who isn't afraid of things that go bump in the night? Who invites

spirits up for tea? And now that my brain is all wrong, I see faces in every window, strangling hands around every dark corner, specters of evil things behind my back at every moment. I am reminded of the many, many nights before I was ever medicated...nights that I scarcely ever think of, they seem so impossibly long ago, like part of someone else's life, and not mine. I remember watching TV while lying in bed with my first boyfriend ever, and suddenly crying without being able to stop. I could not be consoled, because I wasn't sad. I was scared. Terrified. Panicked. And I could not think of a single reason why.

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In bed, in Germany, and I'm still writing, trying desperately to capture each thought, at least in shorthand, or symbols, or some kind of code so that I can come back to them and finish them all later, while the new thoughts pour in, and I wonder why on earth do I feel that any, let alone all, of these thoughts are worth capturing in any form, and all off a sudden (and I write words like "off" instead of "of" just because it feels good to write the letter "F" so I just keep doing it) the door seems much too thin, and I am hiding under my blanket, positively terrified that someone will knock on the door because I simply don't think I could bear it if they did, and I am practically jumping out of my skin at the mere thought of it, and these people on the other side of the door, who wouldn't come to check on me for hours, these people are my friends, and I'm writing down my thoughts literally ten at a time, because I have ten more as I'm writing those ten, and the words are blending together and becoming more and more unreadable with every moment, and I'm thinking there should be some kind of an award for people who write fast, just like there was in the 4th grade when I won the award for typing the fastest, the whole class standing behind me as I sat at the keyboard, the nerdy girl kicking the popular boy's ass, and focusing like I fucking wish I could focus now as I hide, writing feverishly, while dreading that someone, anyone, will come into my little adopted room, and suddenly the thoughts come rushing back to me, fifty at a time, and I know that, even without Atavan (isn't it hilarious that all the time I was on Atavan I thought it was Adavan and I wonder if my doctor heard me say it this way, with the "d" instead of the "t," and thought I was an idiot, but the truth is that I didn't know I was wrong until, by accident, I looked at the label on the bottle of pills I was just popping into my mouth without even knowing what they were and certainly not caring), even without my Amnesia Drug, I am going crazy again, and, if this is a manic state, then why isn't it any fun, because it used to be, or maybe it didn't and I just said it was after the fact because I thought that's what people wanted to hear, that at least I wasn't suicidally miserable ALL the time, that for a month out of every year I really WAS fun without faking it, that I really, really was, so you shouldn't be afraid to love me, because I won't always be like this, and someday I'll take you on the ride of your life, I promise, and my body is starting to shake, and I have that old familiar At(d)avan withdrawal (which I went through at light speed



specifically so that I could make these bloody international appearances that I'm here for at this very moment) and I notice that my rushed and feverish handwriting is becoming slightly more attractive, and I wonder if it's possible that I am becoming so accustomed to being insane that I'm doing it prettily and with style, because, if that's true, then it's fucking sick (and I'm writing parenthesis (write that 10 times fast) within parenthesis (within parenthesis) because I can't not), and I have that awful feeling of jumping out of my skin, chest tingling, throat choking on my own nervousness, but am I not still on a double -- triple on bad days -- dose of the Beta Blockers I have been prescribed for PTSD, the same that are often (over) prescribed to performers (or just taken by performers) for "performance anxiety" (a fancy term for good, old-fashioned stage fright), but I've never had stage fright, and, even if I did, I'm not on stage (or am I, for isn't all the world a stage, and I notice that my parenthesis are one-sided because they have a beginning but no end because they develop another parenthesis and another and another exponentially and I'm actually fighting the onslaught of even more parenthetical asides, because some of them are too scary to put down on paper and besides this is getting ridiculous but still there's more and more and more and my body feels wrong and I've been losing a lot of blood after the awful, brutal, violent abortion that has changed me forever, and I shouldn't even be writing this down, nobody wants me to talk about this, he told me not to talk about this, but I should have known I was pregnant even though I was not supposed to be able to get pregnant but I should have known anyway because the night before I figured it out I had to have butter I absolutely HAD to have butter and I don't even eat butter not ever but I needed plain butter and nothing else and so I stood by myself in the kitchen and ate a whole stick of butter but because of the blood loss maybe this isn't insanity but just iron deficiency and in any case I have chills and my brain is buzzing like it's a 120 volt brain plugged into a 22 volt socket (word?) or is it the other way around and if there isn't an award for fastest writing then there should be and for world's longest run on sentence and I feel sick and I go to check the time but my cell phone is dead or did it just become overwhelmed and annoyed by all of the crazy energy that is pouring out of me and simply decided to check out and I wish I could check out as easily as my phone can and then I realize that there are no cell phones and that this technology won't exist for another hundred years and I see now that the reason I live in the Victorian era on paper is that then as now when you're a girl with depression manic or otherwise you're on your own and all of the attempts at mental health care are nothing but a shabby facade and I'm filled with so many truths right now and it hurts hurts hurts and I want more lies and I'm peeling the tissue paper I'm writing on into three transparently thin sheets for more space in which to write words that don't matter...

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I am writing this note as a test of my memory, because it has seemed tonight that I don't completely recall things done only

I am writing this note as a test of my memory because it is getting worse - I cannot recall things done only an hour ago. I wonder whether or not I will remember writing this. I will ask myself a password, I will write a note to remind me to do this.

The Password is: timesignature

Check back in 30 minutes...

This morning I tried to write the word "crowd," but I looked down and saw that I had written "grown" instead. I erased it and tried "crowd" again, but, when I looked down, I saw that I had written "croud," like "cloud," for some awful reason. Madness... Ho much sould yo lke to spend at he apertmrket today?]]Please rerain from shippng any saes i th ON HOLD vatergories unti oy have a confirmayion from lc0 tha th statsuf been reveded. I have been chemically maipulated since fy first xolofy I am so sad that I have gone and they, those lunitic and por suisidal girls are still inside. I often fanatize about being indise again,,

Lithium. People want to talk about these subjects quietly, which only makes me talk about them louder, if only because I'm embarrassed for them that they are embarrassed. If I'm in the ER and the doctor asks what drugs I'm on and I say "Lithium," his voice lowers immediately and his gestures become more covert. This projects me into a place of weakness that I didn't ask to be put in. I'm not to be pitied -- I'm not embarrassed, not of either the conditions I have nor the medications I'm taking for them, and, for god's sake, I'm not contagious. Mine is one of the few diseases that people DON'T need to worry about catching.

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Lithium. I was on only a starter dose when my doctor called me with the results of my routine blood test and told me that I needed to get my arse to an ER within the next ten minutes. He was annoyed, to put it mildly, that I had left the state before knowing what the results were. I had just flown across the country, my plane had just landed, and the first thing I had to do was find a hospital. Fucking figures. Apparently, I was at a near fatal toxicity level. Does anybody want to explain to me how the hell that happened? Just another medical mystery for EA, I guess...what was the first...oh, yes! When I was two, I had leukemia. The doctors told my mother, who has since died in a fire along with the rest of my family, that I was going to die, and soon. But, two weeks later, I was fine, and no one could explain why. Second medical miracle? I got pregnant while I was religiously on the pill. Pregnant. As a tocophobic, no one will ever know how much it kills me to even write the word. And now, Lithium. I am toxic on a dosage that it is supposedly impossible to become toxic on. I am in the hospital now, and my blood is being taken out of me. They have never seen anything like it, or so they say. I'm tired of hearing this. Dear god, let me be normal.

Am I an idiot for even trying to be OK?





CHUCKY  
MIGHTY  
GACH

IT'S A  
SALT!

IT'S ALL  
NATURAL!

IT'S SO  
GOOD FOR YOU!

**LITHIUM**

Says  
GRANDMOTHER—

“Simple sprinkle on soups,  
salads, and more...”



### Asylum Letter No. XXX

Having no proper surgeon of our own installed in the Asylum, we are often visited by doctors from the outside who can perform such menial tasks as we require from time to time, these being the abortions, clitoridectomies, uterus extractions, and the like.

It is now two weeks since we were honoured by the presence of one Dr. Ramage, whose defining characteristics include a crossed eye, a weak chin, and a religious fanaticism bordering on mania.

At the start of Dr. Ramage's visit, he had been allowed to inspect every inmate's commitment form, and had determined to do the Lord's work by removing the uterus of every girl who had attempted suicide -- an ambitious undertaking that he was fortunately unable to carry out in full before his stay was up. I have already mentioned that melancholy and suicide are said to be "female diseases" caused by "female insanity" (which is apparently quite different from male insanity), and so it ought not to surprise you that a devout Christian should prescribe the aforementioned treatment, for, observe:

Suicide is a sin and a direct offense against God. Attempted suicide is the next best thing, containing all the evil and none of the permanency. Such an attempt is caused by "female illness." "Female illness" is caused by "female insanity." "Female insanity" is caused by the female "parts." The queen of the female "parts" is the uterus, and hurrah! It is excruciatingly logical, is it not?

All sarcasm aside, Diary, it seems to me that the entire medical community has proclaimed war upon our reproductive systems.

However! I should like to request a parade in my honour, for I have now the sole distinction of being the first inmate of the Asylum for Wayward Victorian Girls to live longer than ten days after the surgical removal of her uterus. It was stolen from my body via abdominal incision, and was as painful as you imagine it would be, but I regret to say that I've been through worse. I wonder if I shall live until the end of the month...that would be a real cause for celebration! Sir Edward has collected for me an assortment of lovely papers to write on as a "get well" present, and, if I am to suffer from the fatal infection that my predecessors have, I am committed to my writing until the end, and I have decided that my last written word shall be "degringolade," for no other reason than that I have always thought it quite a silly one, and I have been saving it up for a very special occasion.

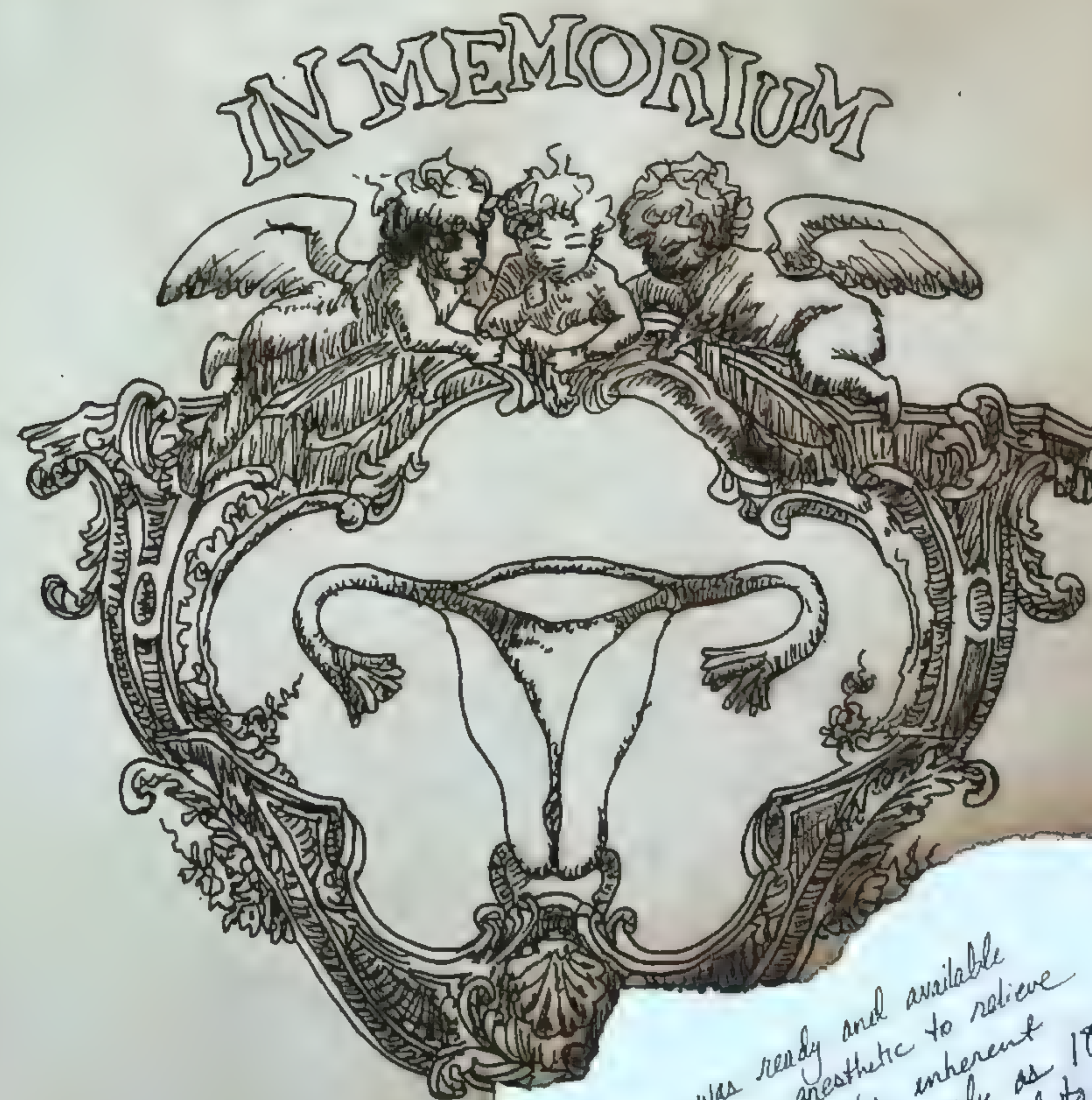
Will I miss it, my little uterus? I suppose I shall, for, once I realized what I was in for, I gave her a name (Victoria, in honour of our fair institution's namesake) and promised to remember her always. I suppose she is now up in Uterus Heaven flying about with all the other uteruses, and having a much nicer time than she would be had she remained inside my body under my present condition of imprisonment. Memento mori!

I should add that I have been warned of Dr. Ramage's intention to return next month, and that, should he find me still melancholy (as though I could exist in any other state), he will be forced to conclude that the cause of my insanity was not in fact my uterus, but is instead a demon that, due to my inherent female weakness, has taken up residence in my bloodstream. In that scenario, the cure could only be arrived at by thrice daily bleedings and a religious ceremony performed for the purpose of exorcising the devil.

Before I quit this theme, Diary, and fall face down on my bit of hay, permit me to write a brief discourse upon the subject of Dr. Ramage's bedside manner, or the lack thereof:

The Doctor felt quite passionately about inflicting as much pain as possible during the operation. As I begged for gentleness in the name of all that was merciful, he explained to me that childbirth is painful only because God intended it should be so as a punishment to all women (the falling of Eve and such...), and so, obviously, pain connected with any female part related to the process of childbirth, which would include all of them, should be endured to its fullest, without any attempt made towards its alleviation in any way. Wholly convinced by such a watertight argument, I lay back and listened as Dr. Ramage fumed over the theories published recently by a fellow called Darwin. It seems they are to do with evolution, and, besides the idea that all species evolve through a sort of "weeding out" of the inferior specimens so that the strong may survive and reproduce, this Darwin's theories propose, to the great vexation of all good Christians, that we are not in fact descended from Adam and Eve, but from monkeys instead.

It was all I could do to stop myself telling the good Doctor that, whilst women may indeed have evolved from monkeys, men have not evolved at all.



Chloroform was ready and available for use as an anesthetic to relieve some of the discomforts inherent in childbirth ~~then~~ as early as 1847, but Scottish clergymen objected to its use, insisting that the pain of ~~the~~ childbirth was ordained by God, and, as such, must not be lessened by any means. It was only in 1853, when Queen Victoria herself chose to be chloroformed for the birth of Prince Albert, that the practice was adopted.



Asylum Letter No. XXXI

There has been talk amongst the Chasers that we are to welcome a new addition to the Asylum staff. He is rumoured to be a surgeon, news that is welcomed by none of us.

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The new doctor has come. We are all dreadfully curious to learn more about our latest tormentor. He arrived in a hansom cab this morning, causing quite a clatter as an inordinate number of trunks and cases were carried into the Asylum and up the stairs to the old Operating Theatre, a great, circular hall in the center of the Asylum which has long lay in disuse. Years ago, under another superintendent, the Theatre had been the silent witness of countless dissections performed by the Asylum surgeons for the education of visiting students and the entertainment of inquisitive aristocrats. Dr. Stockill had no desire to teach, and we had not a proper surgeon of our own (though Dr. Lymer did his very best to cut us open at every opportunity), and thus the Theatre had been shut up. Now, the new doctor's things are being carried in, and I wonder what the next act will be...



My Dear Augusta,

I fear I am not well, and at my age one never fears, but knows. There are things here to trouble my poor mind, dark, dirty things. I have begun to have trouble sleeping again, such as I have not suffered since my baby daughter died all these years ago.

The Asylum has newly appointed a surgeon called Greavesly, and I have newly appointed a strong dislike for him, though I dare not oppose Monty on matters of the Asylum, and keep quiet, attending to my duties as mistress of these wicked girls as I always do.

I need quiet, more quiet, and perhaps a rest. But Monty... could I leave him alone? Surely not, the funny lamb... he can't seem to go a day without me. Is it not a wonderful thing to be needed?

Your affectionate sister,

Prudence

To:  
Augusta Mourmington  
"The Mourning Room" Tea House  
Coventry

From:  
Prudence Mourmington-Stockill  
The Asylum F.W.V.G.  
London

PENNY POST  
THE ASYLUM ENVY



# THE ASYLUM'S FUNERAL BISCUITS

At present, tender and buttery coraway biscuits are given as mementos to funeral guests. Modest in appearance, the biscuits are most often decorated with skulls or hearts, then wrapped in plain white paper and sealed with black wax, or tied up with black ribbon. These edible tokens are often kept in remembrance of the event, but when they are in fact eaten, they are meant to be dipped into some variety of spirit - wine or port for example.

In the Asylum's own Funeral Biscuit recipe, these tempting tributes to the deceased are shaped into hearts and spiced with just a hint of exotic cardamom and coraway. These spices have only just begun to be imported into England from the Far East, and are enjoyed amongst the upper classes, cardamom being the most expensive spice after saffron. It is, therefore, reserved for very special occasions such as funerals, undoubtedly the most theatrical of all Victorian social events.

We do hope you enjoy baking these dainties yourself, for they are sure to console all from distraught widow to family friend, and, thus, when the moment arises, one ought not be caught dead without them. Of course, it may behoove you to keep a box of biscuits always on hand, just in case... well, you know.

# The Asylum's Funeral Biscuit Recipe

## Ingredients:

- 1 +  $\frac{1}{2}$  cups of good white flour
- $\frac{1}{2}$  cup of cornstarch
- $\frac{1}{4}$  teaspoon of salt
- 2 teaspoons of freshly ground green cardamom
- 1 teaspoon of coraway seeds
- 8 ounces of sweet butter, softened
- $\frac{1}{2}$  cup of powdered sugar
- 1 teaspoon vanilla extract

## Instructions:

Sift together the flour, cornstarch, salt, cardamom, and coraway seeds.  
Cream the butter and sugar together until light and fluffy.  
Add in the vanilla extract.  
To the batter mixture, add the flour mixture all at once and mix until just blended, but still crumbly.  
Pat the dough into a disc and chill for one hour.

Preheat your oven to 350 degrees F.  
On a floured board, roll out the dough to  $\frac{1}{4}$  of an inch in thickness.  
Cut dough into heart shapes and place one inch apart on an ungreased baking sheet.  
Chill for 15 minutes.  
Bake for 11 minutes, or until the edges of the biscuits are tinged with toasty brown.  
Makes approximately 2 dozen.

To enjoy, dip your biscuit into a small glass of good port or sherry, and savour whilst remembering your loved one who has gone on to exist in a less corporeal form.

Faithfully, Sir Edward



Asylum Entry No. XXXII

The Asylum's latest addition is indeed a surgeon, and his name is Dr. Gower Greavesly, which is a perfectly hideous name if you ask me, fit only for a gravedigger or an undertaker. Or a surgeon.

I have just returned from my first examination by this Dr. Greavesly, and am none the better for it. A Crasher had escorted me to the Theatre, in the center of which is placed a large wooden slab; this is the operating table. Around the circumference of the Theatre are tiers of balconies providing an equally clear view of the performance taking place on the floor below to all spectators. Grey and ghastly figures watched me from the balconies, but I am accustomed to the ghosts by now. No, what frightened me was the thought of those very real people who used to fill that balcony every day, and who may do so again, waiting with gruesome delight for the victim below to be dissected, the best show in town. The very idea sent chills through me, and I chided myself for being susceptible to chills at this point; I had wanted to be on stage, hadn't I?

On smaller tables scattered about the room lie rows of surgical instruments, set out seemingly for the very purpose of display. The tools are far more threatening than Dr. Lymer's blades and bleeding machines, for these new blades are not meant to cut through mere flesh, but to cut through bone as well. There are saws with jagged teeth, long knives that seem to belong more in a slaughterhouse than in a hospital, pincers, pliers, and metal drills with bloodstained handles. Along the shelves lining the Theatre walls are specimen jars in all sizes filled with organs -- human I assume; at first glance alone I identified a brain, a heart, something that I believed to be a kidney (though I wasn't entirely sure about that one), a human foetus, and an entire arm. I was horrified to see the body of a rat submerged in a pale-pink liquid. There are several empty jars as well -- who are they waiting for, I wonder? Nails on the wall hold three aprons, stiff with gore. Looking up, I saw several rusty hooks hanging on heavy chains from the high, vaulted ceiling. Dr. Greavesly has made quick work of decorating, hasn't he? But three aprons...that means he has brought assistants. Not good.

Dr. Greavesly was waiting for me, and I will give you, Diary, my first impression of him: The Doctor is neither young nor old. He is even taller than Dr. Stockill and has a great amount of red, wild hair, though not as red as mine. He is a lumbering sort of man, with heavy limbs and an animalistic temperament, more feral than tame. My examination had been brief, but thorough. My shift was removed, and I stood in my stockings before the Doctor as he passed his rough, ruddy hands over me, giving particular attention to my abdomen.

I knew what he was looking for.

My Dear Augusta,

I fear a dark day ahead. I dream that my baby daughter is alive before me. She is wearing the wretched costume of our ungrateful lunatic girls, the tiny stockings fit perfectly to her bonny toes. She plays with a peach and laughs, her darling smile just as I remember it, but then she turns the fruit around and I see that it is rotten, the pit crawling with worms. I wake in a panic, my head swimming in that unmistakable odor that remained around my baby after the Angels took her back to Heaven, but before that precious ability to detect all odor was burned from me entirely. It was a sweet smell, like almonds or cherries, and I believe it was the scent of the Angels, but in my dream it is choking me.

I wonder if you would let me come and visit for a while? Perhaps I simply need a rest, and some quiet.

Your affectionate sister,

Prudence

To:  
Augusta Mounington  
"The Mourning Room" Tea House  
Coventry

FLYING POST

From:  
Prudence Mounington  
The Asylum F.W.V.G.  
London



Asylum Entry No. XXXIIII

We are told that Dr. Greavesly has been brought to the Asylum to make reforms, and he appears to be wasting no time. The surgeon has spent the past two weeks examining inmates and cataloguing us into a red, leather-bound book of considerable proportions. I have not seen what he writes, but I do know that he does not document our names, instead referring to us only by our cell numbers (I've become accustomed to having no last name, but this is ridiculous). Those of us who share a cell are differentiated by the addition of a letter following our cell number. Thus, my home address is:

The Asylum for Wayward Victorian Girls  
Ward B, Cell Block W14  
Patient A

My name is simply:

W14-A

Veronica is W14-B, and the Captain, who had been placed in our cell after returning from Quarantine, is W14-C. Little Flea, a girl called Joanna, and Christelle, the spinning French girl, had also become our cellmates after the Ophelia Gallery shut down; they were known as W14-D, W14-E, and W14-F respectively.

I have been summoned back to Dr. Greavesly's Operating Theatre three times now. The first I have already spoken of; the second was much the same, though I was made to endure an invasive physical examination as well, and was introduced to an array of tools designed specifically for this purpose, though one would never guess it by their lack of comfort. I remember thinking, as I lay upon the operating table, "Bloody hell, would it have killed someone to warm these things up first?" I should have felt pain, but everything has become pain to me, and so nothing is worthy of note anymore. I should also have felt shame, or at least indignity, but dignity is dead, and shame implies the loss of a thing I have not had for some time.

My third examination took place this morning. As usual, I was led into the Theatre and shoved inside, the door locked behind me, but the surgeon was nowhere to be seen. I looked about, walking amongst the tables, my curious fingers grazing the tools of the Doctor's abattoir; each device I touched filled my head with the screams of its previous victims; they were deafening, and I put my hands to my ears. Violently was I roused from that too vivid world of my imagination by a loud crashing close behind me. I turned to see a young man hastening to pick up the shattered bits of a glass pane he had dropped. He had, evidently, emerged from behind one of the heavy velvet curtains that shielded the storage areas from the rest of the room. I inspected the young man with a thorough eye (I have learnt to trust no one, and am not likely to speak unless I know what I am getting myself into). He could be a new surgical assistant being trained by Dr. Greavesly perhaps, which would make him my natural enemy. Yet, he looked nothing like the others; where their features were monstrous and mean, his were refined, shy, even inviting. "This is what a young gentleman ought to look like," I thought, and I felt sure, quite sure, that whatever he was, he did not intend to harm me. From the back of my mind rose the whisper of some ancient proverb, something about the road to Hell being paved with good intentions... I brushed away this whisper -- I don't know why.

"I'm awfully sorry," he said, his fair face flushed. "You startled me... I didn't hear you come in."

"And how could you?" said I, looking down at my stocking feet. "We're not allowed any shoes."

The stranger looked a bit taken aback, but then he smiled.

"Well then," he said, "I ought get this blasted glass off the floor at once, or you're sure to cut yourself."

Having collected the larger pieces, he rose and went in search of a broom. Seeing an unchained human being, someone who did not belong here, who was not part of the institution, or at least did not appear to be, made me all the more aware of my imprisonment.

"How lovely it would be," I sighed to myself, "if all that cuts me could be swept away by that broom."

The young man stopped his sweeping and gave me a puzzled look.

"I'm afraid I don't understand you," he said, an apology in his voice.

Just then, a door slammed, and Dr. Greavesly stormed in from the other side of the Theatre, the thud of his heavy boots reverberating off the lofty ceiling. His arms were loaded with willow branches and sundry flowerage, and I decided that, already, this had been the most peculiar examination yet. I had prepared myself for that sickening moment when Dr. Greavesly would order me onto the operating table, but he did not. Instead, he asked the young man to set up what he called an "apparatus" in front of a large screen that had been draped with swaths of sheer, white fabric. I watched as my new acquaintance positioned a wooden box with a sort of bellows attached on the top of a tall, three-legged stand. He had beside him the remainder of his glass panes, and was fitting one of them into the back of the box. After looking closely into one end, he adjusted the bellows, which tilted the front of the box away from the back. A large, black cloth was then laid over the entire contraption.

Meanwhile, the Doctor had piled his mass of flora onto the operating table, seeming to forget that I was in the room as he laid out the foliage like so many surgical instruments. Diary, I need not describe my bewilderment. At last, both men had finished their mysterious preparations; calling me by my cell name, Dr. Greavesly ordered me to follow him behind the curtain. Taking hold of my arm, he pushed me down onto a low couch placed before the screen, and instructed me to do exactly as he said (which I generally assume goes without saying).

"Stay perfectly still."

"Yes, Doctor."

"I am going to place these flowers upon your head, and you are not to touch them."

"Yes, Doctor."

"What is this about?" I wondered. "Am I to revise my role as the mad Ophelia so soon?" The Doctor had selected a handful of poppies, and was attempting to weave them through my hair, but his thick hands were not built for a task of such delicacy, and I dreaded to see what they could do with a surgeon's knife. At last, he had succeeded in piling an assortment of greenery atop my head, but, upon standing back to review his work, was displeased, and angrily swept the entire arrangement away before trudging back to his chair beside the young man, who was busy peering into the box and making adjustments.

"I haven't got the eye for this sort of thing at all, Thomas."

"The name is Thomson, Dr. Greavesly."

"Details. By any name, you're a delicate sort of chap I dare say; perhaps you've got the touch."

Seemingly unsure of whether he ought to thank the Doctor for the insult or curse him for the compliment, Thomson (whether that was his first name or his last I did not know) hesitated.

"Well, go on, I don't think she bites," prodded the Doctor. "Or would you care for an opium cigarette first? I find they help me in my work. Steadies the hands."



Declining the opium, Thomson moved from behind the apparatus and advanced towards me. He bent to retrieve the poppies strewn about by the frustrated Doctor.

"I seem to be destined to live on the floor today," he said, as one wishing to lighten a grave situation.

Then, Thomson was standing beside me, so close that I could hear his heart beating against his chest. "He really is quite young," I thought, "certainly not more than twenty-five, if that." (We have seen very few young men at the Asylum -- they have not the heart for it, or perhaps they have too much. The Chasers make up the bulk of our staff; most are hardened criminals themselves and have lived a rough life, in and out of prisons and poorhouses; they are chosen for being suited to the job, as well as for being cheap labor, which is why they have neither the inclination nor the incentive to treat us any better than they do.)

"Do forgive me," said Thomson.

He took a deep breath as though he were preparing for a swim, and twined a poppy through the tangled hair above my right ear. His fingers trembled very slightly; I pretended not to notice. Thomson seemed pleased with the flower's placement, for he continued on, and soon had every bit of vegetation back upon my head again, but, apparently, in a much more becoming manner, because, after some moments in the company of his cigarette, the surgeon leapt forward.

"Why, Thomas," he exclaimed, "you're an absolute artist, just as your old Bryson said you were. It's no wonder the Queen has her royal eye on you, the old bird..."

"It's Thomson, Dr. Greavesly."

"So you claim. But don't you think we ought to disguise that unsightly mark somehow? Turn the wretch to the other side, perhaps?"

"That heart-shaped scar you mean, Doctor? I must confess that I disagree with you. To my eye, the scar is the very soul of the portrait. It shows a history." Sensing an argument ahead, Thomson added, "And besides, the light is better on this side."

"Hmpf! You young romantics find your 'soul' in the strangest places. Oh, bloody fuck, it doesn't matter a whit what's on her face, and you're quite right -- I dare say our clientele might have a particular appreciation for battle scars. Carry on, Thomas."

Dr. Greavesly had been moving towards me as he spoke in order to better inspect my mark, and, now that Thomson had turned his attention back to his apparatus, the Doctor dragged his heavy hand along my arm and up to my neck; I thought how very different was his touch from the young man's. His long, loose hair was falling over my face; his fingers curled around the back of my neck, his clumsy thumb passing over my scar. I closed my eyes to shut him out. He moved his hand down from my scar to my mouth, pulling my bottom lip painfully, his thumb pushing its way between my teeth, and I turned my head in disgust. His invasive action reminded me of the Count de Rothsberg, and I wondered why it was that men seemed so desirous of putting their fingers in my mouth. Dr. Greavesly sneered at me through his yellow teeth, and, with a low and growling laugh, stalked back to his chair where he lit another opium cigarette. "He is just like the Count," I thought. "They are of the same breed -- men who wound but are incapable of being wounded by anyone. Our disdain is wasted on men such as these. They thrive upon it, and our disgust is the sauce they savour it with. I will show him nothing, do what he will." The surgeon lifted a blossom from the ground and held it up to the light.

"Yes, yes, yes..." he mused, "Shakespeare knew what a woman should be...soft, silent, and always on the verge of wilting."

He crushed the flower in his sweaty, red palm. I tried to remember where Shakespeare had said any such tripe, but could not, and I realized then that our surgeon was of the sort who say they've read a book if they've seen its cover. The Ophelia craze had spawned a great many of this genus; they see a load of girls dressed in nightgowns and flowers and they think they know all about it, but anyone who's ever read the play explained to me that he was going to take my photograph, and that, after the flash, I must remain completely still until he said it was all right to move again. I knew then that Thomson's contraption was a camera. I had heard of such a thing, but had never

seen one, and had certainly never imagined that I should be photographed, especially in a setting such as this. I would have loved to look inside of that box and see how it worked. I would have loved to have a picture of myself performing on the stage as I had always imagined I would -- as I had hoped I would someday be. That would have been lovely, but I should not be immortalized like this. My anxiety must have suited me, for, Thomson, pulling the black cloth over the camera and himself, said, "You're posed quite perfectly as you are. But, perhaps...yes, perhaps you could lift your chin just a bit, and turn your face to the light for me." I did so. I wondered if he were satisfied with the result, for he stood gazing at me for a long moment afterwards and said nothing.

"Yes, I think that's all right," he spoke, at last. "Please, don't move."

It had been years since I'd heard the word "please." With one hand, Thomson slid open the camera's shutter. With the other, he lifted a lit taper from the small table beside him and touched its flame to a metal dish laden with a fine powder. Without warning, a bright flash quite blinded me; this was followed by much smoke and falling ash. I felt an age had passed before Thomson allowed me to move again.

"Thank you," he said, softly, strangely bashful now that his work was done.

The brilliant burst of light had set something off within me. I felt...unsettled.

"I've done nothing," I said, abruptly.

Unaccustomed to kindness, I almost bristled at it, and was quicker with my reply than I had intended. Dr. Greavesly snubbed out his cigarette and rose from his chair.

"Quite so, you haven't," he spat. "I'm afraid I was hasty in my compliments. This poetic pageant of melancholy may delight the pretentious idealists, but the cynics will be bored to tears; they always are, and, as I learnt ages ago in Whitechapel, the cynics are our primary patrons. You know Whitechapel, don't you, Thomas?"

"No, I don't. Should I, Dr. Greavesly?"

"Hmm, I suppose you don't go in for that sort of thing, not yet anyway. Now, look here."

The Doctor had again come to my side and was tearing my shift down over one shoulder, revealing enough to make Thomson blush. "Poor thing," thought I, "with a complexion so fair, he can hide nothing. Is that why he is hidden behind the camera while I am the one in front of it?" I was sick inside, but I kept my vow not to show it. Dr. Greavesly had forced me to one side of the couch until I was leaning clear off the edge; my flowers began to fall. I must have had something of my dignity left after all, for it had been offended. This was all too much. I glared directly at my enemy.

"Yes!" shouted the Doctor, suddenly impassioned. "That has a touch of madness in it. Thomas, my boy! Capture that!"

It was just like working in the Ophelia Gallery again, but, there, I had been able to act the part because I knew the purpose, and I had a plan. Seated before the camera, I was permitted no knowledge of why I was being ordered to pose with my clothing half off, and that is what made me angry. Thomson had been watching Dr. Greavesly handle me, and I believe I saw upon the young man's face the uneasy look of someone torn between two courses of action. The surgeon stepped away from me to allow the camera full view. Thomson could see my face, and no doubt my fury. Something had inflamed him as well, for he quickly slid a new pane of glass into the camera and refilled the plate of powder on the table.

"Stay as you are! It's real. It's perfect. This is how I've always imagined Ophelia! No woman would have drowned without a fight."

Dr. Greavesly paced the room in excitement. The second photograph taken, he fell back into his chair and lit yet another cigarette.

"Dear, young, naive Thomas...today we have begun a new chapter in a very old book, and that," he gestured towards me, "is the image that will sell it."



*Did you know:*

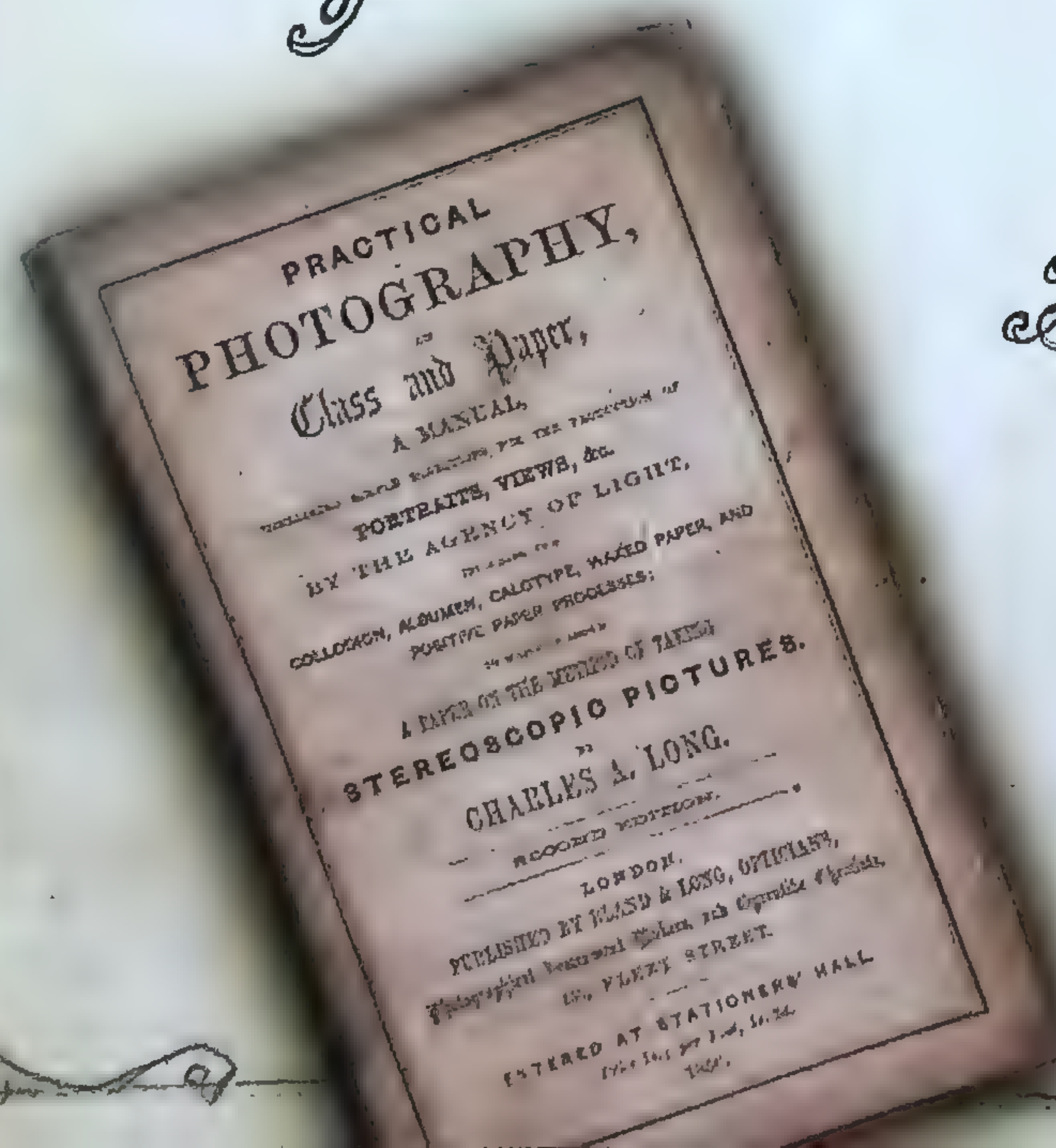
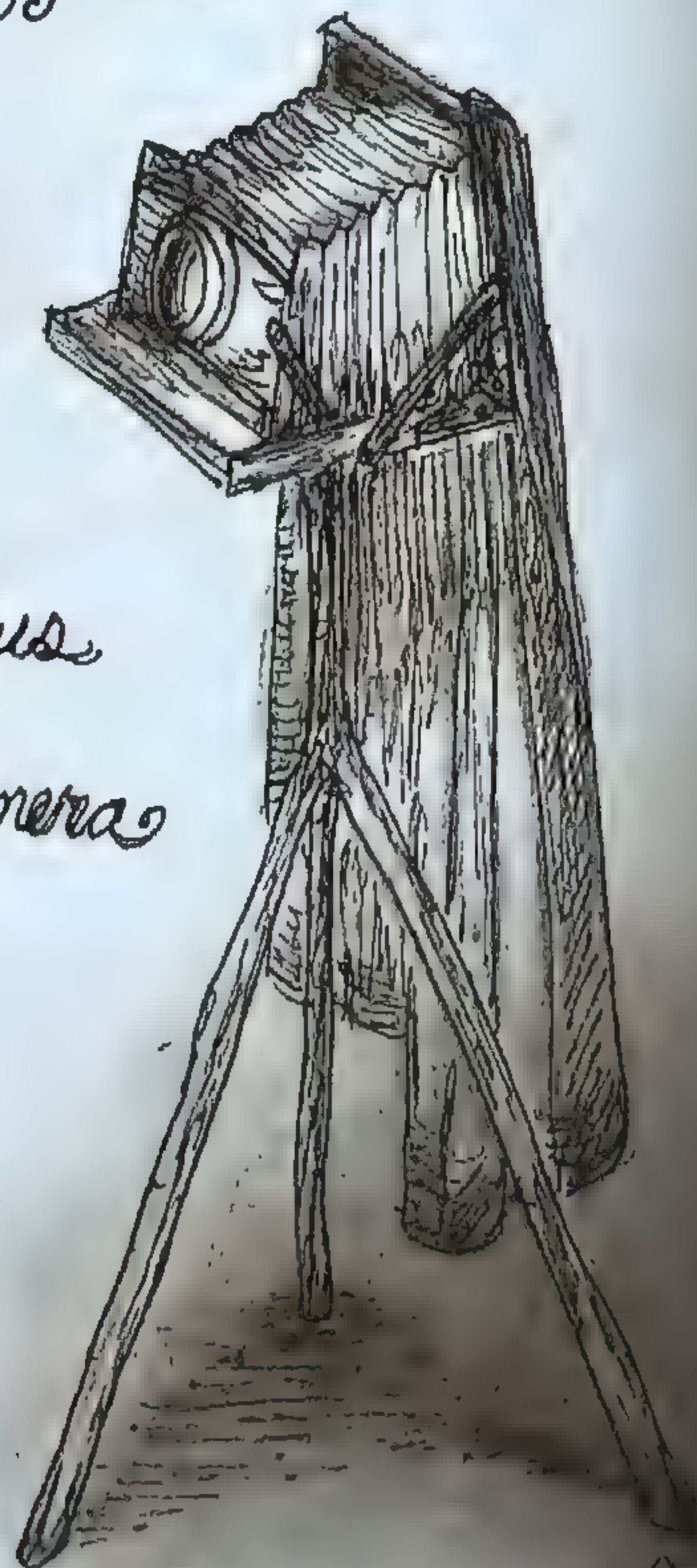
*The world's first photograph was taken in 1826. The subject of the portrait was a roof, which was a very good thing because the exposure time was an entire 8 hours.*

*By 1837, the exposure time was down to a mere 15 minutes, making the photography of living creatures slightly more realistic. Still, any fidgeting would ruin the exposure, and so, if the subject of the portrait was human, his or her head would be held in place with a clamp.*

*True to human nature, the first to adopt and support this new technology used it to create "erotic photography."*

*Typical.*

*Bellows  
Camera*





Asylum Letter No. XXXIV

I have just returned from Hydrotherapy. In Hydro, we are stripped naked, then forced down into individual metal tubs filled up to our necks with ice-cold water. A board with a space cut out for our heads to fit through is locked over each tub so that the Chasers may leave us unattended without fear of our escape. There are one hundred twenty-four tubs in the Hydro Chamber; the inhabitants of Cell W14, all now senior members of the Striped Stocking Society, lay in the tubs around me, and several other girls besides. Flea occupied the tub to my right. I had come to know many of my fellow inmates more intimately than most families ever know one another, and yet I realized that I'd never asked Flea what she had done to end up in this place. I decided to find out, talking to distract myself from the unbearable cold.

"I would not go to Church," Flea confided. "My mother died when I was small, and so my father was my sole guardian. Because of my refusal to accept the Church and its beliefs, my father thought me possessed by the Devil, and so he asked the parish to pray for me. The parish felt it their Christian duty to do even more, and so, one night, several men carrying torches came to my home; they seized me from my bed and locked me inside a closet below the stairs; there they sat, outside the closet door, and commanded me to pray to God for forgiveness until the next morning, when Madame Mournington came for me."

"But why did you refuse to go to the Church?" asked Christelle in her thick French accent that always made us smile.

Christelle had a great talent for brightening any room she entered simply because of the naturally radiant spirit she had not yet lost. I had grown fond of her, but sometimes I suspected that she didn't quite know where she was, or she would not be able to smile so.

"Why? Because the Devil told me not to, of course," Flea replied.

"What! Mon Dieu! I will pray for you tonight!" cried Christelle.

"Oh, I don't mean it, silly. The truth is that I could not believe the teachings of the Church, and I could not pretend to, and that is all. But why were you committed?" Flea asked me.

"A handful of reasons, I suppose," said I, "but mainly because I tried to drown myself."

"I could never do that, no matter how bad things got," said the Captain, quietly.

"No, neither could I, especially as I'll be going home tomorrow," added Veronica.

"Were you not afraid to die?" asked Joanna.

"When one's life has been besmirched by such pain, such horror," I asked them all, "is it so impossible to imagine what dreams may come being better than this, and the chance of that quite worth the taking?"

"But what if there is nothing else? No afterlife at all?"

"Then perhaps I shall get a good night's sleep at last."



My Dear Augusta,

I fear I have not the heart for this work. But have I the heart for other work? I am well kept here. I am needed. I will harden my heart.

Your affectionate sister,

*Prudence*

Augusta Mournington  
1844



Asylum Letter No. XXXV

While the girls of Ward A pray for release, the girls of Ward B pray for escape. The primary difference between the two wards is just that: a single shred of hope, and the complete absence of it.

There are tales of escape -- myths, legends almost. Some of the girls believe that escape is actually possible, but they derive their belief entirely from these faerie stories, most of which, in recent times at least, were originally propagated by one girl in particular: my cellmate, Joanna. I had known Joanna both from Ward A and also as a fellow Opheliac. She is a seemingly normal young lady in every way -- sweet natured, daintily pretty, and positively stinking of good breeding. Joanna had been married once, for on her ring finger is a thin band of skin that is still lighter than the rest of her; this evidence of a life before the Asylum becomes less visible each day that she goes without sunlight, and she will soon be as pale as the rest of us, with no remaining proof of a former life, or of having had a place in the heart of anybody.

As Joanna displayed such an agreeable nature, it took months for me to discover that she was an incorrigible liar. By then, she'd already had me believing that she had seen Sachiko alive and well before being admitted, and had even invented an elaborate story about attending a concert and hearing Sachiko play. But when she added, "She's a lovely girl, and plays beautifully, but, to tell the complete and untainted truth, I've never entirely trusted blonds," the jig was most definitely up, and it was painfully clear that Joanna had never seen Sachiko at all. Still, it had been easy for Joanna to fool more than a few of the girls with such tales, accounts of inmates we had seen disappear existing on the outside, and having better and more exciting lives than we could possibly imagine, for, after all, isn't this what we want to believe? It is not to be cruel that Joanna tricks the girls, but simply for her own entertainment. And, in defense of the gullible, in cases where an inmate vanishes without warning and is not heard from again, if no one of us can prove her death, did it really happen? How do we know? And wouldn't it be nicer to believe that there is life after the Asylum? I would never be the one to strip these girls of their delusions, for God knows they have nothing else to keep breathing for, but the reality is that the "escapees" have been quietly disposed of, and we will never see them again unless we dig up the Pits.

On the subject of inhumanity, I often marvel at the Asylum staff's ability to live comfortably within the filthy and corrupt world they have created -- not just the Chasers, but the doctors as well. We, the inmates, are here because we were thought unable to function as we should within the boundaries of proper society. Perhaps the doctors and staff had themselves become unable to function in the outside world, and so built this miniature society of their own -- a real society, with laws, a well-defined hierarchy, and even its own sins. Like all prisoners, we have created our little world as well, and so, here we are, three worlds, spinning madly, grazing each other and only just avoiding ruin at each rotation. There is reality, there are the doctors, and there is us. We are the nobodies. The bleedables. The killables. The rapables. The keep-quietables. The hidables. The bury-in-the-darkables. The unloved, uncared for, and the torturables. We are the lowest of the lowest form of criminal, but with less rights, less medical care, and less likelihood of being released. We are the inmates in this Asylum -- the patients in this hospital. And the joke of it all? We are here to be cured.

My Dear Augusta,

I fear sleep. My dream of my baby daughter comes every night. I also see the husband dead only weeks before my baby was gone. His face is the cruel face he had in life; he stands before me -- he does not advance to strike me, yet his stillness is worse, and I wake gasping for air, the odor that exists only in my fevered dreams stifling me. I wish to tell my son, to seek his counsel and his comfort, and perhaps ask him to give me something to calm my nerves, but I can talk to him less than ever now, oh! my son. I confess to you alone, dear Sister, that I have begun to feel a little afraid of him. You alone know how I have struggled to be affectionate with him -- always, and perhaps I go too far in this, if only, I suspect of myself, to disguise the strangeness that I have always felt towards him. I have tried, Lord knows I have, and I believe that I have come to love him, though whether it be for lack of anything else to love, I do not know. Monty dotes upon me like the devoted boy he has always been, but he seems also to have become quite suspicious, and believes that either the servants or I have been in his laboratory almost daily. His primary concern seems to be that his chambers should not be entered, and he guards himself and his work with a passion bordering on ferocity.

I am reminded of when Monty was a child and I caught him stepping on snails in the garden just to make Violet scream. I took her up in my arms and ran into the house. I will never forget how he looked at me when I found him... without remorse, without apology, he was taking such pleasure in frightening her. I never saw him do anything so vile again, but that did not help in cleansing my mind from the horrible event, and when I would often find dead rats lined up in perfect rows under his bed and teacups filled with crickets floating in some strange fluid, I always wondered... I am surely a horrible mother, how could I think such things?

These dreams awaken parts of me that I should much prefer to let sleep, and so I keep to my bed and leave the daily running of the Asylum to my son and his staff, coming out only to unlock the Lunatic Wards for the attendants and lock them again at night because I dare not trust anyone else with the Ward Key. I desire to be useful again, but I need a rest first. I am not myself.

I should very much like to come and visit you while your grand-daughter is studying abroad, for I am afraid it still pains me to be in the company of female children, and I hope you will take pity on me and forgive me my rude request, for I do not think that I will ever mend.

Your affectionate sister,

Prudence



Asylum Letter No. XXXVI

From the entire Asylum stock of roughly two thousand, less than one hundred girls have been selected to be photographed. From the day he arrived, Dr. Greavesly has been documenting our medical details in his red leather book, and, by way of repeated examinations, he has narrowed the masses down to this relatively small number. What the criteria are, and why, we are utterly devoid of insight.

For reasons unknown to me, I have been the only inmate called back to be photographed more than once. Several pictures have now been taken, and, though being in the presence of the surgeon's leering eyes turns my stomach, I endure it almost willingly, for it allows me temporal freedom of my cell, and also because I have, Diary, grown rather fond of Thomson's company. The budding photographer has been granted a room of his own in which to carry out his work, as it was necessary for Dr. Greavesly to resume his surgical duties, for the which he required the unobstructed use of his Theatre.

And yet, I feel horribly guilty at not being the body on the operating table -- at being let loose from my cage while my sisters suffer in its cramped, cold corners. But, what have I ever done that was for myself? Have I ever taken a single moment to do as I wished? And still I feel remorse because I know that I am not the only girl inside the Asylum or out of it to have lived this life of self-denial. Well, the fact remains that I am ordered to sit for these photographs -- I do not request it, and, should I ask to be relieved of this duty, I would not be allowed, for it is encouraged and, in fact, arranged by the surgeon himself, though for what purpose I cannot yet guess. Should I say one word in protest, I would be tossed into Quarantine for being rebellious. Wouldn't I?

As I recline comfortably before the camera I have slowly become friends with, warm for once, with fragrant flowers in my hair and a cup of tea at my side, my guilt at being preferred threatens to consume me, and I wonder if it is truly guilt alone that makes my heart heavy, or, perhaps, fear of any small happiness that I know cannot last. I have lost what little I ever had, and my sole consolation in this world is that I can lose no more. Yet, by gaining something I am afraid to be deprived of, have I not already lost this consolation? Perhaps there is always something to lose, no matter how little one has to begin with.

Thomson seems ever to be searching for something in his work -- something that is true, he says, that is not the physical, but becomes the physical through transcending its invisibility. He believes that the soul of a person can be photographed if only the subject is willing to share it, provided the photographer knows how to draw it out. It is not that he despises physical beauty for its own sake; on the contrary, he has the greatest respect for it; I had known this from the moment he placed that first poppy in my hair. It is simply that he attains to something more, and I am happy to assist him in his quest.

"I hope someday to photograph things as they are," Thomson said to me one afternoon, as I sat for him the fifth time. "I believe this tool of photography could be used for change. It could tell the truth about things, and force people to pay attention. I cannot pursue that now -- there is no profit in it, and we all must eat. Besides, Em, I find that most people prefer to immortalize the things they like best about themselves. They are not wrong to want this, of course, for I am no exception, but it is the same as asking a person to say aloud, and before company they admire, or worse, who admire them, what they desire most in the world. Would not a person always say something honourable? Something they hoped would please someone else? Who among us would be brave enough to choose that particular moment to tell the truth? The camera offers the permanent documentation of a person as they are, but the moment I step behind the lens, my subjects raise a shield, and so I can only document them as they

are not. Yes, Emily, a portrait is a terribly false thing, for what shows in a portrait is nothing more than the mask of everything the subject would like the viewer to believe he is."

"And am I a terribly false thing?" I asked Thomson.

"You," said he, "are a terribly real thing in a terribly false world, and that, I believe, is why you are in so much pain."

Thomson had told me the one thing that I knew to be true, but it seemed a cruel thing to show one her own image if she could not change it. The tears rolled down my cheeks -- great, heavy, hot tears -- and I hid my face in my hands. These were the hopeless tears that Ophelia cried before she leapt into the brook -- the tears of every girl who had been pushed too far, and could not find her way back again. I could have filled the Thames with my tears, yet not express half of what was inside me.

My too-honest friend left his post behind the camera and knelt down beside the chaise I sat upon. He wiped away my tears with his pale, intelligent hands, and, for one moment, a moment that would likely never come again, I thought not of survival, but only of my heart.





Asylum Letter No. XXXVII

A horrible day... It began with Dr. Greavesly himself retrieving me from my cell to take me to Thomson's room for the sixth time. Seemingly in quite a hurry, the surgeon held his red leather book under one arm, and grasped my elbow with the other, pulling me roughly down the hall and up the stairs leading from Ward B to the Upper Staff apartments, where Thomson's temporary studio was located. Once inside the room, Dr. Greavesly released his grip on my arm and went to lock the door in the adjacent wall. He set his book upon the desk at which Thomson developed his photographs, and searched his pockets for the key to the room. My curiosity to know what was inside the book overwhelmed me; I could not take my eyes from it. Finally, having located the key, Dr. Greavesly left me, locking the door behind him. You can imagine, Diary, my exhilaration when I saw that the book was still on the desk.

I knew it would not be long before Dr. Greavesly realized what he was missing and came back for it, and so it was with a pounding heart and trembling hands that I ran to the table. I touched the smooth cover. I had done this before, but where? The spindly fingers of memory reached out to me from another time, another world, and, all of a sudden, I was there, hiding in the attic with Sachiko, drunk on sherry, and opening the book containing the painted portraits of the girls who had left the school. Instantly, I knew everything -- I had only to lift the cover to confirm it. I did so, and there it was -- page after page of provocative photographs followed by records of age, physical characteristics (the deformities of some girls were actually listed as selling points), assurances of virginity (ha!), and, of course, price. All of the pretty girls from the Ophelia Gallery were there, and dozens more...a hundred Ophelias going to a hundred watery graves. And this is what people want? Is this a perversion of our age, or has it always been thus?

Worst of all, the peepshow began with a large card printed with my picture, the same that Thomson had taken of me on that first day. I removed the card from the book and turned it over; on the back was an advertisement for a brothel, a house of prostitution -- call it what you like -- but it was our house. The card was advertising the Asylum. Dr. Stockill was renting out our bodies by the hour, and, through my image, I was helping to sell these girls, my cellmates, my friends, and myself into the hands of criminals who want us only for the novelty of being with a mad girl, which is, apparently, quite a delicacy (who knew?). I was helping to line the pockets of the doctors, for God knows none of the proceeds would go towards the upkeep of our crumbling institution. My photographs were everywhere, prominently featured as the very archetype of what was for sale. The prices were impossibly high, but also impossibly low. "This is how much we are worth?" I thought; "And how little?" This, the fruit of my hours with Thomson and his camera...oh! what had my fair friend done to me? To all of us? Is this what it all had come to? I wrenched the hideous volume from the table and threw it down to the ground; there, I tore through the pages, ripping out any that bore my likeness. Suddenly, the door crashed open, and in rushed Thomson, out of breath. He hastened to where I sat and pulled me from the floor.

"I have to get you out of here!" he said, in a panic. "Oh, dear God, Em, I've been to the city...I saw, oh God, we haven't got time now -- you've got to run away from this place!"

I wrested myself from his arms and pushed him away. I was overcome with rage; the sense of betrayal was a piercing bullet, burning into my chest.

"Emily, please!" cried Thomson.

"Please?" I spat the words. "I've got to run away, have I? Well, that's just bloody brilliant! Why on Earth didn't I think of that? And which locked door shall I walk

through to my waiting freedom? Which armed guard shall I trot past with a wink and a smile? Where do you think we are? Oh, Thomson...why did you come here..."

I was choking on a torrent of tears and anger, and could not form the words to express it all.

"Emily, please listen to me -- I didn't know!"

"You didn't know? You didn't know? How could you not know? How much were they paying you to not know?"

"They said it was all a study, a sort of experiment, an attempt to prove the humanity of the mentally...whatever! I thought it was all for good, I truly did. But I am so sorry, so very sorry...I never meant for this to happen, please...please believe me. I will fix this somehow, Emily, darling."

Again he tried to hold me close, and, this time, I did not fight him, for I knew it was the last time we would ever touch.

"I couldn't bear for it to go forward -- it simply cannot happen. Not to you."

"And what of the rest of us? No, my friend, you cannot fix this, for there is nothing to fix -- everything has happened just as it was always meant to."

I held Thomson's face in my hands, but the sincerity in his clear, blue eyes only hurt me more, and again I pushed him away.

"And yet, I am to believe you knew nothing? What of this 'clientele'? Their 'preferences'? This 'selling'? You knew nothing? I am a prisoner here. I am nothing. I can ask no questions. But you could. And you didn't. Did you think nothing of that?"

Thompson sank to the floor, kneeling at my feet.

"I thought of nothing but you," he said.

"Don't say things like that to me. You have killed me -- if not through betrayal, then through your wretched ignorance. One is little better than the other."

Having heard the noise, Dr. Stockill entered the room, accompanied by two Chasers, and followed by his mother.

"What on Earth is this!" cried the Headmistress, clearly surprised to see both the photography equipment and me out of my cell.

"It's nothing, Mother," said the Doctor. "Leave us, please."

"Monty..."

"Leave us!"

Indignantly, Madame Mournington swept out of the room as the Superintendent turned to the Chasers.

"Quarantine. Now!" he ordered.

The Chasers came at me prepared for a fight, but they got none. I held out my hands to be bound, yet I never took my eyes from Thomson. It was he who protested and thrust himself between me and my captors, but Dr. Stockill came forward and covered Thomson's mouth with a handkerchief; my former friend quickly collapsed. It tore my heart to see this, but I knew that Thomson was far from dead; I had seen the Doctor subdue many a rebellious inmate in this way; the victim would awaken a day later with a pounding headache, but none the worse. The Doctor's lackeys would have Thomson far away by then -- it would be too indiscreet to murder him, and also unnecessary, for there were other ways to keep him silent.

I do believe, Diary, that Thomson had not set out to betray me, to betray all of us, but I could not conceal my resentment at the part he had played, and it was best to say goodbye. I hope that, someday, he will take that picture that will change things...that will force people to pay attention.



Asylum Letter No. XXXVIII

We, the members of the Striped Stocking Society, intend to hold a meeting in the Ward Hall at our next available opportunity. We hope to discuss the potential purposes of, and possible strategies to avoid, Dr. Stockill's increasingly deadly chemical experiments. Sir Edward has promised to introduce to us someone who may shed a pinhole of light onto the situation, and we are eager to see who it is.

\*\*\*

The opportunity to meet in the Ward Hall presented itself earlier this evening. Once the members of the S.S.S. had taken their places in the corner near the window, I tapped softly on the striped wall behind us. A rustling was heard from behind it, and, a moment later, Sir Edward emerged, a smaller rat hopping along behind him. Both rose to their hind legs and bowed to us politely.

"My dear children," began Sir Edward, "we, the League, feel that there are things you must know about the plot with which we are all inadvertently connected. We ourselves have been endeavoring to understand the purpose behind these experiments that we have all been subjected to for a very long time now, but it was not until recently that we were able to gain the information we need if we are to formulate a plan of defense. It is with great pride that I now introduce to you the rat who has made the greatest advances in this quest for knowledge, and at immense peril to his own personal safety. May I present, my children, Basil."

Sir Edward gestured to the smaller rat, who bashfully shrugged off the attention.

"Oh, Sir Edward, you flatter me too much," said Basil, in some version of Cockney. Then he sneezed. "Pardon me, ladies." Another sneeze. "Ahem. It is true that I have spent much time in the laboratory of Superintendent Stockill during these past months, a feat that was said to be impossible due to the cleanliness and order in which the Doctor keeps his surroundings, that order leaving us 'vermin' little chance of obscurity. However, due to my natural talent for espionage, I have managed to remain hidden from view; I have watched the Doctor as he tortured and killed countless of both of our species in the name of 'discovery,' all the while being horribly powerless to stop it." Sneeze. Sneeze again. "However! I was in possession of a medical instrument more powerful than any in Dr. Stockill's laboratory..."

Basil paused, for dramatic effect.

"What was your instrument, Basil?" asked the Captain, realizing that our honoured guest was not likely to continue until someone did so.

"I'd hoped you would ask, my lady. The instrument is this!"

Basil tapped his snout, then sneezed.

"You see, dear ladies, Dr. Stockill, the Asylum's resident Master of Chemistry, may spend weeks, months, even years testing formulas, charting the results, and testing them again, but what he wouldn't give to have the deciphering capabilities of a lowly rodent, for our sense of smell is nearly one million times stronger than that belonging to a human, meaning no disrespect to you, ladies."

"None taken, Sir -- do go on," I said. I wished to waste no time in the unraveling of the mystery that had consumed me for as long as I had been a prisoner.

"Well, it was precisely this sense that I employed to discover what the Doctor was working at. Dear ladies, I have been reformulating the wisps of scent that I detected

from my place high up in the broken gas-lamp, re-imagining these deadly perfumes over and over in my brain, adjusting the amount of one chemical to balance another, tipping the scale first this way, then that way, a bit more on this side, then a bit more on--"

"Basil!" interrupted Sir Edward.

"Oh, yes, of course, Sir Edward" Basil continued. "What I mean to say is that I have been able to identify the exact ingredients of Dr. Stockill's formulas, match them to diseases rampant in the world outside, and, in the process, have deduced the knowledge not only of what the Doctor has been doing, but also, and perhaps more importantly, what he intends to do next. I now believe that we have all been mere whetstones on which the Superintendent has been sharpening his ultimate weapon. But! Like the whetstone, we are intrinsically stronger than the weapon we are being used to create!"

A series of sneezes followed, and Sir Edward patted Basil on the back, warning the smaller rat not to get himself too worked up. After explaining that the prolonged exposure to the Doctor's chemicals had harmed his respiratory system, causing him to sneeze at such an alarming rate, Basil recovered somewhat, and continued on to tell us, between sneezes, how, through their communication with ship rats arriving in England's ports from more exotic locales, the League had learned that the dreaded Plague had hit Asia, and that pockets of Europe had already been infected; millions were dead with more sure to follow. There was a growing terror in England that the deadly virus would demolish their own country as well, just as it had not so very long ago during the era of the infamous Black Death. Dr. Stockill had quickly realized that there lay at least as much power in the hands of one who could cause the Plague as in those of one who could cure it, and to accomplish both would be to control society completely; to accomplish both would make one a veritable god amongst the entire human race -- worshipped and feared by all.

While Dr. Stockill was considered to be at the top of his profession, the field of experimental chemistry was a brutally competitive one. With so many ailments still lacking any sort of remedy, everyone who owned a test tube wanted to be the one to make a fortune on the cure for something; our Superintendent was certainly not the only chemist experimenting day and night to find a cure for the big "P," and he knew it. Some had already claimed to have made the discovery, and, down in the city, the street vendors' carts were piled high with bottles advertised to a desperate public as the remedy they had all been waiting for, many even supplying lists of the names and locations of persons successfully treated -- names of people who, of course, did not exist. This did not mean, however, that the real solution might not be near.

As our bewhiskered instructors informed us, there could be but one way in which Dr. Stockill could insure himself to be the only man with the cure, and this was to create both the cure and the illness himself. To that end, he had been systematically infecting the Asylum rats with mutated strains of the Plague virus in order to measure the effect of the altered illness, first upon the host (the rats), and then upon the surrounding population (in this case, the inmates). The Doctor had been able to infect the girls directly for some time, of course, and had been doing so by the thousands over the past years, as he struggled to create an "improved" form of the virus -- a form that he could depend upon to be utterly resistant to any remedy but his own.

If I may return to the present for a brief moment, I see now that Dr. Stockill is quite aware of the dangers his experiments expose himself to; during his lately increasing midnight walks through the Ward B corridor, our Superintendent has been seen wearing a heavy, dark robe and Plague mask, its pointed snout packed with protective herbs and oils, and the round, screened-over eye cavities, great and gaping, giving him the vacant stare of the soulless executioner. Even the most hardened inmate could not stop her blood from running cold at the sound of the Doctor's slow and steady footsteps coming ever closer from the far end of the corridor. She could only look through the bars at the tiny flicker of the torch he held and watch it grow larger, knowing that, in mere moments, the flame would be close enough to illuminate, first, the tip of the mask's long white beak, then further up, and then bringing into view those ghastly hollows that hid the Doctor's own black eyes, erasing from his visage any slight trace of humanity he had left.

While his relatively unprotected assistants often died from contamination, the Doctor had successfully controlled the spread of the disease by containing the inmates until they naturally expired (which did not take long), or, if necessary, then himself utilizing his own preferred method, chemical asphyxiation.



quick, quiet, and bloodless. As Basil reported, the Doctor believed that he was coming very close to a cure for his new disease; he slept less, and paced our darkened halls more than ever. But all of this was useless to him in the outside world, where he would need to rely upon a swarm of infected rodents to transmit his new, master Plague to the mass population, and this was the one aspect of his experiment in which Dr. Stockill had been making no progress. The reason, Basil explained, was twofold: First, Dr. Stockill had indeed succeeded in identifying the chemical makeup of the disease closely enough to create something unique and equally dangerous, but the rats were gradually becoming immune to this artificially manipulated virus, and their bodies seemed to be adjusting to any changes in the new strains the Doctor continued to introduce, leaving them virtually unaffected; they were also living much longer now than ordinary rats, which allowed them more time in their lives to learn from their experiences and develop their brains far beyond what had ever before been thought possible for a rodent, or for any other animal for that matter. Second, for all of his knowledge, there was one very important detail of which Dr. Stockill was not at all aware. What the Doctor didn't know was that it had never been the rats who were spreading the Plague in the first place. Rather, it was the fleas that were stowing away on the backs of the rats that were the responsible party, rats having the ideal fur in which to shelter such parasites, being smooth and resistant to water ("Like a pirate!" the Captain had whispered, lunging towards an anxious Flea), and, thus, keeping the insects well protected from the elements. Therefore, simply infecting the rats and expecting to see an outbreak in the inmates, or in the public beyond, was never going to yield the expected result.

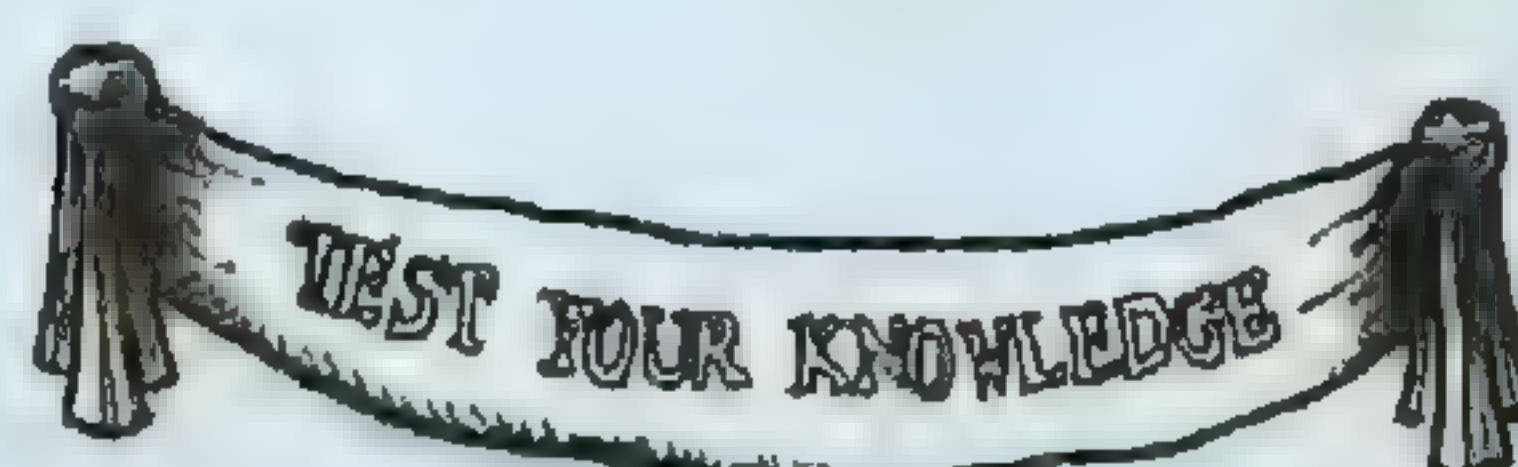
"We must use Dr. Stockill's ignorance on this point to our advantage," said Sir Edward, giving Basil a chance to rest, "and we must also do our parts to hinder the successful creation of this 'cure', for, once a cure exists, the Doctor will find a way to distribute the disease, rats or no rats. His victory would render him the most powerful man of medicine or otherwise in the entire world; every life and every death would rest in his hands alone. We cannot let that happen."

I wanted to be as inspired by Sir Edward's speech as appeared the girls around me, but I could not be. I'd had enough of trying to prevent the inevitable -- of worrying what would become of everyone but myself.

"The world is a horrible place, Sir Edward," I said. "Sometimes I think how silly we are to want to rush back into it when it was the world that put us here in the first place. And, even so, we will never again see beyond these walls...we are going to die in here regardless. Why should we care what happens outside?"

Sir Edward answered me without reproach, but sternly:

"It does not matter why you should care, my child, because you do care, whether you choose to admit it or not."



## POISONS

and their Effects

Acids: _____	Iodine: _____
Bichromate of Potassium: _____	Mercury Perchloride: _____
Carbolic Acid: _____	Pyrogallol: _____
Chloroform & Ether: _____	Silver Nitrate: _____
Cyanide of Potassium: _____	



ANSWERS ON PAGE 227





DEPARTMENT OF PUBLIC HEALTH AND CHARITIES

# KILL THE RATS

AND PREVENT THE PLAGUE

TRAP THEM      POISON THEM

**RAT-PROOF YOUR BUILDINGS**

**TRAPS:** The best traps for houses and barns is the large Snap Trap. Snap Traps are best to be baited with Bread, Barley and Maltmeal.

**BAIT:** Should be changed daily between Clean, Fresh Meat, Bacon, Pickled Herring and Children's Waste and should be properly secured to the trap. Always examine the Traps after baiting and see that they are placed close to the wall at the most landing place.

**POISON:** All dwellings are liable. Good Rat Poison. Follow directions and DO NOT PLACE WHEN ACCESSIBLE TO CHILDREN or DOMESTIC ANIMALS.

**DISPOSITION OF RATS** | THE CITY WILL PAY A BOUNTY OF  
5¢ FOR LIVE RATS  
2¢ FOR DEAD RATS

**AT THE RECEIVING STATION**  
RACE ST. PIER, DELAWARE AVE.  
IF NOT CONVENIENT TO TAKE RATS TO STATION, PHONE TO  
**ELECTRICAL BUREAU 55**  
AND THE RAT PATROL WILL CALL FOR THEM

The Rat is the transmission of the following Plagues that harm and often destroy: Bubonic Plague, Typhoid, Typhus, and other diseases. Adults have long a healthy respect for the Rat's disease property and contribute to the spread of Plague. Each Rat is a Plague-Seed.

**RAT-PROOFING BUILDINGS** | Building the Rat out of houses and barns takes more time than to the long run in the most effective manner for destroying Rats.

FOR FURTHER INFORMATION CALL AT OR PHONE TO  
**ROOM 45 CITY HALL**  
**PHONE ELECTRICAL BUREAU 547**





Asylum Letter No. XXXIX

A suite of rooms upstairs has been decorated in gaudy style for the pleasure of the "clientele," who visit the Asylum frequently in order to partake of only our finest of lunatics. They want us exactly as we are -- wild, in tatters, in tears, and, of course, bound.

The eroticism of death grows ever stronger in society outside, and, for many of our clients, we are instructed to play the "Ophelia" (you may now feign surprise). I myself have been carried several times now to the Hydro Chamber, where I must forcibly reenact our heroine's drowning, the brass tub filled with blossoms, my soaked garments slipping from me just as they do in the popular suicide paintings beyond the gates. I challenge anyone to tell me that these repetitive portraits of a girl engaged in the very private act of suicide (so private, in fact, that Shakespeare would not even write about the act, instead leaving it for another character, Gertrude, to relate in a strangely detached manner) are not teeming with sexual imagery.

I have also been held down under the water and given a thorough groping by clumsy hands before being allowed to breathe again. It is remarkable, really -- the death of this fictitious character has taken over my life, and all of our lives here in the Asylum; it seems there will never be an end to what we shall be required to endure in her honour. I cannot say that being used thus does not affect my mind in gruesome ways, but, rather than breaking me beyond what has already been done, I feel myself hardening -- outwardly becoming more resilient while, inside, my ability to escape into my own world grows ever stronger.

The ghosts have been quiet of late, but they speak to me now, and I sit with my hands pressed against the weeping walls of Ward B, Cell W14, and feel the stripes stir beneath my palms. I have undergone such a transformation as an inmate here that my demeanor as a victim of this prostitution ring is one of defiance -- I play music in my head, I do as I am told, and I dare them to do their worst.

Hospital Entry 25: COMING DOWN .

My surrounding inmates are either shuffling around the Day Room in a sedated stupor or violently attacking both property and people in frightening fits of psychotic rage. There is no one in between besides me, and so I don't know where I belong. Since we aren't allowed into our rooms until bedtime, I really have only two options: I could find a place on the shabby green couch with the other drugged patients (because we are all drugged here) and watch game shows for hours on end, or I could pace the hall next to the nurse's booth, waiting for the next dose of pills to be doled out. I cannot make the decision, both choices seeming equally impossible to me, and so I end up standing in a corner by myself, waiting for someone to notice that I don't belong here. Nobody notices.

I am coming down now...down from the bouncing, chattering mania of the past week. Soon I will be so low that they will not be able to pull me out of bed. I look forward to this...I want to close my eyes. I am calm. I behave myself. But I have that within me that could tear this place apart...

When I was first admitted to the asylum, I vaguely remember experiencing one brief moment of something resembling peace, knowing that it was all out of my hands at last. But that was before I lost all faith in the hands that were now in control. I wanted to have faith -- I really, truly did. I did not intend to waste my time by rejecting treatment; I intended to cooperate and to get what I could out of this surreal experience. But there has been no treatment.

And now I know why we are really here. We do not go to the asylum to be cured. We go to the asylum to die. This is not the bitter voice of one solitary crazy girl. This is the truth.





I have developed the habit of scanning every room I enter in order to list in my mind the potential things I could use to do harm to myself, or simply to imagine what the staff believes I could use to do harm to myself. They haven't trained me not to contemplate suicide - they have only taught me to be more creative about it, not that shoelaces and pencils are really candidates either...

CELL MATES  
FOREVER

One day, as I sat in the Day Room with Lucy and watched a woman called Angela sat down beside us on the green couch. I recognized Angela as one of my ~~room~~ room-mates who looked under everyone else's bed and fiddled with all of the electrical outlets in the room at night. She also had the reputation for being an irremediable ~~thief~~ thief, causing the nurses to warn the rest of us not to leave any of the few belongings we were allowed lying around. Angela had just been visited by a man who could have been her father, husband, brother, or other, but who was of no exceptional appearance.

Angela, who was prone to violent paroxysms of excitement, annoyed Lucy and I terribly by chattering on about how her visitor was a very rich, very important man who gave her loads of money, and was coming back soon to take her away and sue the hospital for 10 million dollars.

As Lucy and I rolled our eyes at each other, Angela changed the topic of her one-woman conversation to foreign languages, claiming that she could fluently speak absolutely every language in existence, adding that, even if she had never heard the language before, she would learn to speak it instantly the moment someone began to speak it to her.

Lucy spoke near-perfect Thai, and, while I was content to ignore Angela entirely, my couch mate thought it worth challenging Angela's claims.

"OK, Angela," said Lucy, "can you tell me what I'm saying right now?" Lucy proceeded to say something in Thai. Angela showed no sign of understanding. "Sometimes I need a little time to think about it," she said.

Last night I had a dream that I was singing a rockin' cover of "Let's Call The Whole Thing Off" (as in "you say potato, I say po-tah-to") in front of a hardcore Christian anti-abortion rally. Whatever this means, I'm scared. But hey, at least they clapped at the end, although it was mainly out of fear I think. Whatever... I ROCKED it!!



SUICIDE  
DIARY



NOTE: Dearest Children, I again feel that this sub-section of Emilie's notebook is most easily read in typed form. It is clear by the indecipherable handwriting that Emilie never intended for anyone to read these entries from her darkest period.

Faithfully,

--A WATCHFUL FRIEND

Nothing in my life has ever made me want to commit suicide more than people's reaction to my trying to commit suicide.

\*\*\*

By the time you find yourself seriously considering suicide as an option, it is as if there is no other way. Surely there must be another way, but it requires more effort than you wish to exert, right? No. There is just NO...OTHER...WAY. No other way at all.

You no longer consider whether or not you will, but how you will. The will is already established. There are so many ways how, and most of them should never be attempted, because I do mean attempted, and attempted is not what we want. The vast majority of suicide attempts DON'T WORK. And suicide, once chosen as an option, is not something you want to fail at. My shrink once told me that, of all the suicide survivors he had interviewed, every last one of them was glad that it hadn't worked out.

"And what about the ones who succeeded?" I asked.

"Well, we can't interview them," he calmly replied.

Don't be so sure, I thought. During another appointment, I told my shrink that the people around me were telling me that, when I cut myself, I am being self-destructive.

"I know that I am supposed to agree with that," I said, "and that society and everyone in the fucking world agrees with that, and judges me for it. But, as odd as it may sound, I am not doing it to hurt myself. I am doing it to rescue myself from the pain I feel when I am not doing it. I am not moving one step closer to killing myself when I am pulling that razor across my thighs, or carving that crossed heart into my chest; if anything, I am moving AWAY from death. I don't think about death when I'm cutting, but I can't think of anything else when I'm not. I know it's wrong, and that I must be very, very sick, but I feel that I am trying to help, not hurt myself. I feel like it is the life force within me that compels me so fervently to do this, not the lack of a life force. Does that make me crazy?"

"Don't kid yourself," my shrink said. "Of course you're trying to help yourself by cutting. You're trying to distract your mind from the desire to die. You are trying to wake up the part of you that



is drowning in depression. You are trying to survive. Don't think for one minute that you're not."

While he is certainly doing what he can to get me to the place where I don't have to cut myself anymore, during my slip back into the suicidal danger zone, my doctor basically endorses my cutting, as long as it keeps me from even more permanent scars, these being smoking, frivolous sex, and/or death. Also, if I continue to cut, then I can carry out my assignment, which is to document my emotions at the time of the actual cut, not sometime after, not as though I were reading a page out of my life as I generally do, not like always.

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I switched from blue to black ink because I just couldn't stand it anymore, but I look down and I'm writing with the blue ink again...how does that happen? One little, tiny, miniscule choice I made to make myself feel somehow better -- black ink vs. blue ink -- and I can't even pull that off? Pathetic.

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Could one's whole life be one long failed suicide attempt? Is that possible? Imagine if you were contemplating suicide on a more-or-less daily basis for as long as you could remember, but you never actually made it happen? Or, alternately speaking, could one's whole life be one long but ultimately successful suicide? What if you suffer through every day until you're ninety-two years old, and then you finally take all your sleeping pills at once? Or perhaps you wouldn't even need to. Perhaps by then you could just end your life at will, with the same dignity that animals have when their mate dies, when they are too sick to keep up with the herd, or when their time is simply up.

When I am manic, I am so far ahead of the herd that I can't see them behind me. When I am depressed, I am too sick to keep up with the herd at all. Why can't I just run with them?

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While I do not deny having it, I am not fond of the idea of manic depression, because it often appears to me to be used as an excuse for bad behavior. I am interested in reasons, not in excuses, not for me, not for anybody else. In my own life, I give myself absolutely no leeway to be an ass or offend anybody when I am going through one of my episodes. If I so much as snap at someone because I am nauseatingly depressed or detoxing from some pill or other, I flog myself for it later. I may despise the disease, and hate the way that the media and the public in general promote the idea that any Hollywood celebrity who chronically embarrasses themselves in public must be bipolar, my distaste for manic depression doesn't make the disease any less real.

There is another thing that troubles me, and this is the way in which it is often said that a particularly unattractive part of a person we are acquainted with is in fact not part of that person at all, but merely a result of their illness, which may be entirely true, and yet, by ascribing the offending behavior to the illness and not to the sufferer, we learn a lot about the illness, but nothing about the person. Whole years of people's lives, whole sections of people's characters are wiped away with one diagnosis, and the only thing we don't know is who that person would have been had they not existed under the influence of their disease. Would they have been better people? Worse? The same? You may think I am only speaking of those whose manic behavior becomes criminal or dangerous, or whose depressive character destroys their marriage, but I am not; I'm talking about me, and every other person who is not quite sure who they are once you take away the disease. It's all very well to say, "Oh, don't worry, that's not you, that's your illness." But what, then, am I left with? What is me, and how can I be sure?

So many bipolar people, when asked if they would wish to be completely rid of the disease if they could, answer that, in fact, they would not. You observe these people, and they are so miserable that it is unimaginable that they would not choose to be free. But the truth is that manic depression is a disease that infects so many aspects of your life, involves so much of your character, that, if you have it, it is extremely difficult to imagine what you would be like if you did not have it. Someone with an amputated leg is hugely affected by their handicap, but if you ask them whether they'd like their leg back, chances are that they will say yes, because they know that they once had two legs, and they remember all of the great things one can do with two legs. It is all very clear. But, for manic depressives, we are so wrapped up in the disease that the fear of the life unknown is often greater than the fear of a continually miserable existence.

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I have heard it said that we are not the solitary characters we seem, but, rather, we are a million machines inside of one larger machine, with a sort of grouping device that tells us that we are only one person, one individual, one personality, and for nothing more than to allay the inconvenience one might experience if one saw, and publicly displayed, what one really was. The implication is, of course, that this is all an illusion -- we are not what we insist we are.

What, then, if one of these myriad machines, these infinite facets of us, decides to die? Is there only one form of suicide, or is it possible that various other unseen but equally important parts of us can die, while our bodies, our other parts, live on? I myself have not been successful in my attempts on my own life, but I would swear that there are bits and pieces of me dying every day. I am full of suicides, of rotting corpses, of brittle skeletons, infecting the living parts of me. I am dead, though I do not die.



I sometimes imagine myself as that beating organ, kept alive inside a glass jar fitted with the usual electrodes, determined and strong, yet born without the necessary human shell, and innately and permanently sad for the lack of it. How long can I be kept alive, the drugs alone sustaining me and my incessant beating? One year? Two years? More? Or, even worse, forever?

And what of the "me" that exists outside of my imagination? Can that which never lives, ever die? Or is that simply one more thing that I am incapable of? I wish that my walls were brick so that I could not see the life outside of me, that which I am not allowed to partake of. I am tired of my glass walls, and even more tired of questions.

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Sometimes I don't eat for days simply because I want an excuse to feel as empty inside as I do. My non-depressed friends often ask me what it feels like to be this way. I usually tell them that it feels like you are going through a heart-wrenching breakup every single day, but that the break-up is with yourself. "Can you imagine the pain of that?" I ask. "Think of your very worst breakup, then imagine you have no time to heal from it -- no time for the pain to dull -- because when you wake up the next day, it has started from the beginning all over again." They can't imagine, and I think I must not have chosen the right metaphor.

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Many people seem to think it's going to be helpful if they try to identify with you, so they say things like, "I feel sad sometimes too," or, "I'm also really moody." You may as well tell a person who's bleeding to death that it's all ok because you got a paper cut once.

Even worse is that inevitable friend who says, "You're a lot more normal than you think you are." For me, this is absolutely the cruelest thing anybody could say, because it robs me of my hope that there is something better than this, and it is also disgustingly ignorant of what it feels like to be this way. It oversimplifies everything, and basically says, "If we can deal with it, so can you."

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I am my heart's undertaker. Daily I go and retrieve its tattered remains, place them delicately into its little coffin, and bury it in the depths of my memory, only to do it all again tomorrow.

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Depression is a rather rude houseguest; Depression rarely calls ahead to see if it's a good time, and Depression never arrives alone. Depression brings its friends -- Despair, Self-Injury, and

Suicide -- wherever it goes, and it doesn't check in advance to insure that extra beds are made up and waiting, for they will take YOUR bed and leave you lying on the floor you haven't had the will to scrub in months. Depression doesn't have its valet bring over an extra supply of tea and biscuits in anticipation of its arrival. No, Depression and its friends will barge right into your quiet, cozy home, spill your tea, smash your best teacups, devour all of your favorite biscuits, and then vomit them up again because Depression has no appetite. You might think that, without any appetite, Depression and its friends would become weak, shrivel up, and die; you could then pass them out of your body much as you would an early-term miscarriage -- something hardly noticed. You may experience some heavy cramping of the abdomen, or perhaps, in this case, the mind or the heart, but then you would see the blood flowing, the blood that serves to pass that which is to be expelled. You see the blood flowing to within an inch of your life, and you think, "Yes, oh god, yes! That which I do not want within me is being washed out, cleansed away, and soon I will belong to myself again!" But there is always something you are not supposed to see -- something that gets in the way and dirties things up just a little. Actually, you are supposed to see it, but you're not really supposed to SEE it. I'm talking, of course, about the remains. Blood and membrane. Tissue. Me. And not me. These are the remnants of Depression and its bedfellows, and the thing is that you have to check yourself, your underthings, your bed sheets, just to make sure they've gone. But that's just it: You have to see them on the way out, and that's just too much for some people. Some people take so long saying goodbye to Depression and its friends that they get used to having them around. They have begun to enjoy cooking for their guests, secretly looking forward to the spontaneous (or not so spontaneous) get-togethers, and have completely lost the desire to sleep in their own beds, the floor having been quite as comfortable as they feel they deserve, which isn't very much, as it turns out. So, then, when you feel the blood pouring out of you, and you begin to see the things you were told to look for, you become frightened at being alone. You haven't had a moment's peace in months, but now you're afraid to be alone. Ridiculous, isn't it? If you don't spend a Sunday night curled up in a ball and crying on the bathroom floor, what on earth will you do with it? It's simply too daunting.

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Untreated, or unsuccessfully treated, depression is considered to be a terminal illness. No joke. Depression is the invisible Plague. Like carbon monoxide, you can't see it, hear it, or smell it, but, if it gets you, you may just never wake up.

What, then, is manic depression? A kamikaze attack, perhaps? Killed by a suicide bomber...that would be terribly fitting, I think, for what is depression of any sort but Death crossing over into life and infecting it with nothingness? The survival instinct is always the first to go. Death by Death. Murdered or killed or both. I will see the humor in this until the end.



After the cutting and the suicide attempt, I was told that I clearly have no sense of self-preservation. While I did not appreciate the snide and critical tone in which this was said to me, I did agree with the statement. I myself have said as much, haven't I? But I think I was wrong.

Suicide may not be self-preservation, but it is self-defense. By taking your own life, you are simply attempting to defend yourself against whatever assailants are attacking you.

Gravedigger 1: "How can that be, unless she drowned herself in her own defense?"

Gravedigger 2: "Why, 'tis found so."  
(Hamlet, Act 5, Scene 1)

It is not seen as insane when a fighter, under an attack that will inevitably lead to his death, chooses to take his own life first. In fact, this act has been encouraged for centuries, and is accepted even now as an honorable reason to do the deed.

How is it any different when you are under attack by your own mind? Does it really matter whether the enemy comes from without or within -- approaches you from in front or behind? As one who has walked her share of dark alleys, I can tell you that it doesn't; a threat is a threat is a threat, whether you can see it coming or whether you only suspect it's creeping up behind you, and usually, you're clever enough to know.

There is a passage in the wonderful book "Jane Eyre" by Charlotte Bronte that I have memorized every word of, so often have I repeated it inside my mind over the years, wondering if a person who could be so kind to someone with a sad and troubled mind actually exists, though all evidence I have seen points the other way. In the passage, Jane asks Rochester if he would still love her if she went mad, and here will I write from memory what he says:

"Then you are mistaken, and you know nothing about me, and nothing about the sort of love of which I am capable. Every atom of your flesh is as dear to me as my own. In pain and sickness it would still be dear. Your mind is my treasure, and if it were broken it would be my treasure still; if you raved, my arms should confine you, and not a straight waistcoat. Your grasp, even in fury, would have a charm for me; if you flew at me wildly as that woman did this morning, I should receive you in an embrace, at least as fond as it would be restrictive; I should not shrink from you with disgust, as I did from her. In your quiet moments you should have no watcher and no nurse but me; and I could hang over you with untiring tenderness, though you gave me no smile in return; and never weary of gazing into your eyes, though they had no longer a ray of recognition for me."

Where is the one who will say such to me? I am as kind as Jane, as good as Jane, have sacrificed as much as Jane, but I am despised

for attempting suicide, for cutting myself, for requiring the medication that makes me catatonic, as if I enjoyed any of it. S\_\_\_ chooses to think that I did this to him -- that I chose, or allowed myself to be this way as a personal attack, and I am being punished for it. I will never stop being punished for it, for he will never think of me the same way again, and he has said so. Jane, you are a lucky bitch.

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"I saw his good side today," we say, or "Her ugly side came out." We speak as though we have only two sides to choose from, but we are all made up of more sides than we can count, and certainly more than we are generally allowed to recognize, let alone show, if only because even our closest acquaintances, or especially our closest acquaintances, have a terribly difficult time with seeing us wear different dresses.

Yes, there are an infinite number of sides to all of us, this I know. But, in a bipolar person, there are two in particular that are in constant conflict with one another. You don't swim. You stand either on the shore or in the sea; it is always a question of life or death, life or death, life or death, constantly constantly constantly. Combine the two elements and you're fine and balanced; you get sun, you get water, you maintain your equilibrium, able to ride the waves and ripples of the cloyingly metaphorical tide until such time as you naturally expire.

The worst of it is that, in the case of a person with a mental disorder, it is rarely considered that there is a part of them that is completely lucid -- that knows exactly what's going on. And, even if it were acknowledged, when someone attempts to take their own life, it is always, always seen as the "insane" part of them that made the final decision. "Poor thing, if only she hadn't gone crazy...what a crazy, crazy thing to do." I don't buy this. In my case, and in the cases of many I have either known or known of, it was not the insane half (because we're divided into halves, remember?) of the person that wanted to die -- it was the perfectly rational half. It would be insanity to stay the course while the ship is going down. It is not insanity to end it in your own way, on your own terms, and in the most painless way possible. I believe that the sane part is the part that makes the ultimate, the final, the executive (no pun intended) decision.

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Another strange contradiction I have noticed: When someone commits suicide, everybody wants, understandably, to believe that neither they themselves nor the person who died are responsible in any way, due to that whole "crazy/sane" thing I mentioned above. But, when someone only attempts suicide, everybody wants to hold the criminal entirely responsible. They even ask things like, "Why did you do it?" and that is exactly what I mean -- if I have a reason, then that means I'm not crazy, right? But I believe it is



precisely because no one can ask this question of the dead that they prefer to simply assume that the victim was crazy. And, aha! "Victim." That's just it! You die, you're a victim. "Suicide victim"...we've all heard that. You live, you're a stupid, selfish, cruel person. I've been a bad girl. A bad, bad dog.

So, tell me this then: I know very well where attempted suicides go -- they go to an asylum. But ought they better go to a reform school? If they are indeed flawed in character, as I myself have been made to feel that I am, what can a mental hospital possibly do for them? They should be morally reformed, not mentally. Right???

Despite what you might think, I am not arguing for either position. I am merely pointing out the gross inconsistency. But because I know that a disclaimer may be necessary (not that anyone will ever read this journal, nor do I want them to, but still...), I shall insert one here:

Do not think that I am recommending suicide as a course of action for anyone. In fact, I am not recommending anything at all, nor am I discouraging anything at all. I am simply telling a story -- my story, and this includes my opinions and observations, which I feel I have a right to. I am neither a role model nor a teacher.

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I am a child with a parasitic twin called "Manic Depression." My extra limbs are extremely inconvenient, and simply to walk to the market as others do is an exercise of Olympian proportions. I know that this headless torso, which, in the womb, had attached itself to mine, has no brain of its own; for any of the decisions it cares to make, whether to flap a twisted arm, or flail a disfigured leg, it borrows my brain. For these limbs I have no use, and can reap no benefit from. But still I maintain them, as well as an array of duplicate organs, half of which are already dead. This "mistake" then that lives inseparable from me, the result of my being given, essentially, too much of a good thing at some point in my early fetal development, is technically undesirable in every way, and yet, the attempted removal of it raises very serious concerns: Where does the one begin and the other end? Will we risk cutting off some of ME when we amputate IT, and which organ belongs to whom, and aren't some of them shared? In the end, I don't know myself without these extra limbs, twisted and dead as they may be...will I recognize who I am? I hope that I will be so completely consumed with running up and down hills and picking daisies in the sunshine that I simply won't have time to care.

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I dreamt last night that I made a bizarre metaphor in response to being asked why I couldn't get over being raped, and I said, "It's like making a cake and then accidentally dropping in a tablespoon of bleach instead of butter. You can never take the bleach flavor away -- the best you can do is try to mask the flavor, knowing

that, no matter what you add, you never, ever will. It's always going to taste like bleached cake." Even my dreams are full of ridiculous metaphors.

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I am a tall cup of tea, filled to the brim, and with no lid. Standing still, I am perfectly settled, full to bursting, but not bursting. But, pick me up, and I spill a bit. Walk with me, and I spill all over myself, yourself, and the tea towels too...

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More cake visions: I picture a cake that is frosted over and over by countless people in countless colors and textures until it is an awful mass, bright and shapeless and grotesque, the result of layers of people trying to make a thing better and better and better. When I crack open the hard, colored shell of icing to get down to the truth, the cake that lies beneath it all, I find nothing...not even the cake. The cake has rotted away into dust -- dried up, or eaten by a lost ant that had happened upon a crack in the icing shell years ago. The cake, the base of it all, was just another layer, just another cover-up -- a placeholder, a distraction, from the truth, from nothing, which is the only thing that exists no matter what, that never goes away, that lasts forever, beyond all the distractions and place holders, beyond time, before, and after.

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There are periods when I do not listen to music for days, nor read books, nor take in art of any kind for weeks, even months. Being eternally hungry for knowledge and experience, this fasting is especially painful, but the pain is not nearly as strong as my fear of being yet again overwhelmed -- overtaken by all that art and knowledge will stir within me, and all within that and all within that until I am once again drowned. It is pain to abstain from the things one loves. I was a musician before I was born, and yet, god, at these times, how it hurts me. Music is tears and sugar is dust and no love is enough love to be truly love and nothingness is a relief I crave.

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Coming home from the airport a few days ago, I spotted a fallen bird's nest, tattered, but still holding its shape. I passed the same bird's nest again this afternoon. It was in bits and pieces, and I could clearly see what it was made of, which was largely feathers and bits of fluff, and I thought how strange it would be if people could make their homes out of their body parts and leftover personal remnants...walls packed with arms and discarded toes and fingers, chairs and couches stuffed with fingernails and tufts of hair... Birds make their homes out of themselves...why don't we?



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pain, pain, pain, ↑  
pain, pain, pain, ↑  
pain, pain, pain, ↑  
There is no high that is worth  
this kind of low.  
pain, pain, pain, pain, pain, pain, pain, pain

So part of you dies, can you be haunted  
 by that part? It is generally accepted  
 that if someone dies badly in a  
 particular house or other location, a  
 the spirit of the dead will likely be  
 there still, haunting the house and  
 its occupants -  
 Could the same be true of us, of our  
 own lives? A part of you dies, can you  
 haunt yourself?



dear Augusta,

I fear something has gone terribly wrong, and I know not how to right it again. I serve my son, and I exist to promote his genius and all the good that he does for these wayward girls, but I am not at ease with this new development in commerce within the Asylum.

I realize that those we admit are defective, most often criminal, and, in every case, a plague on society, and I do believe we treat them better than they deserve, and as well as they could expect. But I had never intended to become the mistress of a house of human traffic. I am quite sure I have authored such a scheme. Surely he is not aware of what is taking place, or he would never support it. I am right to think this, am I not? I should speak to Monty, and tell him what a devil he has hired in Dr. Greavesly, but, in truth, I have come also to be afraid of the surgeon, and I dread to think what might happen if I were to upset him, for I know he is a violent man.

I also fear weakening the authority I have worked so diligently to establish these many years, and I know that it is my duty to society and my country to rid the civilized of the defective, to clean the streets of the unclean of mind and body, but I cannot stay to watch countless girls, however defective, be abused physically for the Asylum's profit, especially knowing that their inevitable offspring will be torn from inside them, a week after which they will be up for market again. I feel I should be away from the Asylum for a time, until all of this rights itself. I shall arrive in Coventry by the first train next Tuesday.

Your affectionate sister,

Prudence



## Asylum Letter No. XL

This morning found me watching through the bars as a coach drove into the courtyard below. Madame Mournington emerged from the Asylum, and my old friend Maudsley followed her with a traveling trunk. From the look of things, our Headmistress was embarking upon a journey of some duration, but not too terribly long, for her trunk was too large for one night, yet too small for several. I wonder who will be in command of the Ward Key during her absence...

So, I recently learned that I have Synesthesia. What the fuck? Synesthesia.

People with Synesthesia experience "a neurologically based phenomenon in which stimulation of one sensory or cognitive pathway leads to automatic, involuntary experiences in a second sensory or cognitive pathway," and you may thank Wikipedia for that concise definition, as my own was much more flowery. For example, some people with Synesthesia taste words. Some people see numbers. I see music. But not only music. I see numbers, letters, days of the week, months of the year, years themselves, decades, centuries... I see them in colors but also in space, and with individual personalities, or inherent emotions. And not only when I see them, but also when I hear them or even imagine them. Among the three major types of Synesthesia, Color-Graphemic, Spatial-Sequence, and Ordinal Linguistic Personification, I have been diagnosed with all of them, though there does not seem to be a name for the one involving notes and music. Sometimes these sensory phantoms correspond with each other but I cannot discern what the association between these differing symbols means. In one particular case, the note "A" is brown, and so is the number "5," and the letter "F." The note "B" is blue, dark blue, as is the letter "B" and the number "2." Unlike those previous examples, this one following actually makes a bit of sense:

The note "C" is a warm, creamy white and has a light glowing from the inside. The letter "C" is also cream, but without the light, as is the number "1." Then we connect the number "1" as corresponding to the note "C," being the first note of the scale. Now, here is where things begin to get a little fuzzy, because many symbols are not solid, ordinary colors. Some are oddly moving combinations of colors like green and yellow, but with lights coming through and a shadow over one side. These colors have no names, so I categorize them as simply "greenish" or "reddish black," knowing that these descriptions do no justice to what I am seeing in my mind. A peculiarity: The numbers "10," "100," "1000," "10,000," and all variants of ones and zeros are always a combination of all the other colors, with the resulting color "pixels" as a result. It is so quickly that the number becomes almost clear. The only reason I have



Asylum Letter No. XLI

I am disappointed to find that it is Dr. Stockill himself who will be fulfilling our Headmistress's duties and taking control of the Ward Key. It is no surprise, of course -- none of the other staff are terribly reliable, not even the other doctors, who frequently disappear to drink or engage in some debauchery or other.

Dr. Stockill is the only one who never leaves.

## Answers to the Test on Page 207

1. Chalk, Magnesia, Common Whiting, or Carbonate of Soda. <sup>note: avoid warm drinks</sup>
2. Emetics, Magnesia, or Chalk.
3. Olive or Castor Oil. Milk must be taken freely.
4. Artificial Respiration. Cold water to the head and extremities.
5. No antidote. Inhalation of Ammonia Vapor.
6. Vomiting should be encouraged. Gruel, Arrowroot, Starch.
7. Raw eggs beaten up in water should be swallowed.
8. No certain remedy. Encourage vomiting by all means possible.
9. Common Salt in Water, followed by an emetic.

Asylum Letter No. XLII

Having been dubbed "The Cell," the Asylum prostitution ring has proved a smashing success from its commencement, our photographs having worked their mad charm on our madder clientele who had already experienced just about everything else the world had to offer. Of course, The Cell has vastly increased the number of abortions that Dr. Greavesly has been obliged to perform, and I have never been so glad to be without a uterus as I am now. Before The Cell's creation, it was only the staff who had been responsible for the girls getting themselves "into trouble," as Dr. Stockill liked to put it, and which implied that the girl herself was responsible for her disgraceful condition, but the likelihood of this is instantly multiplied (pun intended) for any of the girls forced to belong to the Asylum's latest money-maker.

Once a girl suspects she might, in fact, be "in trouble," she will attempt nearly anything to end it herself rather than wait for the doctors to discover, for, once they are involved, there is little chance we will ever see her again. If we do, she will be forever altered, no more than a dim shadow of her former self. Our surgeon's methods are excessively violent, and executed in unsanitary conditions with filthy tools that invariably lead to fatal infection, if not death upon the operating table. It is a daily travesty in which the bath water is most often thrown out with the baby.

To avoid this fate, there is a regular string of girls running out of line on the way to the Bathing Court in the hope of throwing themselves down the decaying staircase, but this only draws attention to their condition, and lands them on the operating table with even more alacrity. In the event that a girl's condition is not attended to until her baby is quite well developed, or even completely developed (and when this happens, Diary, it is no mistake), Dr. Greavesly will employ a pair of steel forceps with which to violate the girl and crush the skull of the foetus/fully formed baby, killing it at once -- after all, we couldn't very well have the Asylum filled with mad babies, could we? The Doctor can then harvest the foetus/fully formed baby and either dissect it himself for his own "research," store it in one of his specimen jars for later dissection, or sell it extortionately, either whole or in pieces, to the anatomists who are always in rabid search of newly dead infants and fetuses to tear apart, and care neither where they come from nor how they died. The majority of the proceeds from these illegal sales are not reported to the Superintendent; they are the surgeon's own dealings.

Though he had certainly earned this title before, it is for these operations in particular that Dr. Greavesly has earned the title, "The Butcher." Prior to the establishment of The Cell, he was likely to diagnose hysteria in a girl if he desired surgically remove her uterus, but now he needs no excuse at all. And, in true medical fashion, Dr. Greavesly had the support of Dr. Stockill and Dr. Lymer in treating the symptom and not the cause.

I believe that Dr. Greavesly had been looking forward to this very aspect of The Cell when he was recruited to head its organization, his expertise in this having been, I believe, part and parcel of his appeal to the unscrupulous Dr. Stockill, who hoards money more than he could ever spend, and will raise it in any way he can. For his efforts, the surgeon is insured a continuous queue of bodies that positively require cutting open. He is breeding us for our babies. It's all so easy...and it occurs to me: If I were a murdering madman, where would I hide? It is a terrifying realization that the Asylum provides such a perfect cover for criminals of so many kinds. It welcomes them with a warm and loving embrace, shields and protects them from public scrutiny, and gives them absolute freedom with which to practice their blood, tissue,

As I have often heard the surgeon explaining to his assistants, in the case of those who survive the barbaric abortion procedure, the process of this procedure, and the repeated process, is actually beneficial to the girl's health; it seems that those



kept in a constant state of pregnancy utilizes the female reproductive organs, the idleness of which is thought to be the very seat of insanity; it only follows that their use should bring the girl closer to her "ideal" state, which is generally agreed to be one of perpetual fertilization, and which is said to result in a docile nature. Of course, in defense of Dr. Greavesly's role in the organization of The Cell, how else were we helpless inmates to be impregnated if not through charitable donations by gentlemen from the outside? And why shouldn't everyone benefit -- the Doctors as well as the inmates and their patrons? It is only logical.

However, I have recently overheard Dr. Stockill chastising the surgeon for damaging the "merchandise." The Superintendent has complained that these operations are being performed so savagely that the corpses have lost any value to anatomy colleges, where they generally fetch a price anywhere from five to fifteen pounds; the pressure to make money off the dead has increased since more and more of Dr. Stockill's victims are ending up in the Death Pits, their Plague-like sores rendering them quite as unsaleable as does Dr. Greavesly's operations.

The Butcher resents the power that his superior wields, and is clearly not accustomed to being governed in anything; I suspect he is doubling the sadistic nature of his operations just to spite his superior. The screams emanating from the Operating Theatre fill the institution day and night. The bodies too mutilated for school use, Dr. Stockill supervises the selling of the corpses *a la carte*, employing Dr. Greavesly for the actual handling of the goods -- a head for the phrenologist, a leg for the unlicensed anatomist -- but we have more than even they can carry, and the Death Cart is being run off its wheels.

As much as I abhor this institution, I am forced to admire the strategy behind it: They make money when they admit us, they make money while we exist here, and they make even more money when they kill us, which in turn allows them to make that amount all over again off the girls who take our places. What other industry may boast such profit? Thus is the trade in lunacy, and it's bloody brilliant!

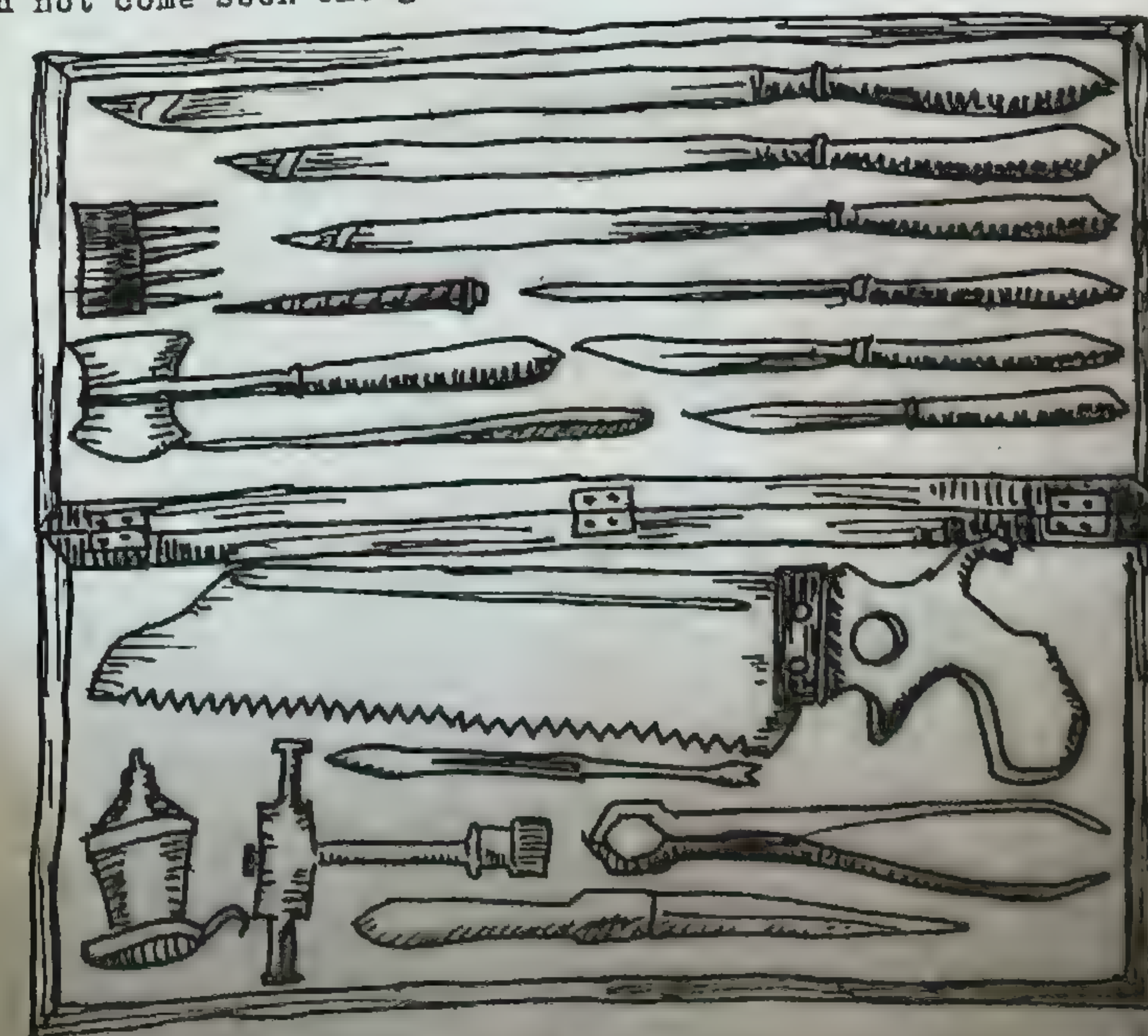


## Asylum Letter XLIII

While the inmates have gained a new tormentor in Dr. Greavesly, Dr. Lymer has gained a new mentor. Our venerable master of bloodletting has even been trying his hand at the smaller surgeries, and I fear where this path will lead.

The Butcher has taught his increasingly bloodthirsty protege a new trick, which I shall here describe:

When I arrived at the Bloodletting Wing for this morning's leeching, I observed Dr. Lymer producing, from a folded velvet cloth, a long and very thin silver spike, pointed on one end to the breadth of a needle. He had buckled a screaming inmate down to one of the metal bleeding beds, and I watched in horror as, with the aid of a heavy mallet, Dr. Lymer drove the point of the spike directly into the poor girl's forehead. I heard the crack of her skull as it was pierced, and she fell suddenly silent. Though internally frantic, I did my best to appear calm, realizing that the more "hysterical" I became, the greater my chances of undergoing the same procedure. As the Doctor revealed to his assistants at the time, he believed (conspicuously failing to credit his teacher for these inane beliefs) that many of the more severe cases of madness were the cause of excess pressure being applied to the skull by the brain within. Similar to the theory behind the bloodletting, that theory being that madness coursed through the blood and must be forced out, Dr. Lymer's new theory was that, by puncturing the skull, the internal pressure would be lessened, and the subject would return to "normal." And God bless Dr. Lymer's eternal optimism, for he continued to perform the operation on inmate after inmate even though the best success the procedure had yet been met with was the ability of one girl to stay alive for a whole week afterwards, during which time she was perfectly calm and did nothing but lie on her back and stare at the ceiling, not a flicker remaining of the vibrant, complex, living, thinking being she had once been. Of course, this was viewed amongst the medical staff as a great achievement -- the patient had indeed been quieted, and, thus, caused no more trouble. The eventual death of the girl only proved that the operation had not come soon enough.





Asylum Letter No. XLIV

I have come to my realization that the Asylum's prostitution ring is inextricably linked with that which governed the Conservatoire, as well as all of the other factions that Anne had told me of before she died. The way in which it operates suggests this, and Dr. Stockill's close financial affiliation with the Count de Rothsberg and others of his set confirms it. How much of the world might be connected thus? What secret alliances might be made right under the noses of an unsuspecting public?

It is midnight, and a light rain is falling outside the barred window of Cell W14, delivering the scent of horses and wet leather from the courtyard far below. Some of our fair Ophelias had been "entertaining" in the suite set aside for such things, and the satiated gentlemen are just now departing. My cellmates and I are watching as Maudsley, Smythy, and two more of our Chasers masquerade as butlers, and escort our honoured guests from the Asylum, lighting the way to the waiting carriages. It may seem strange that we would wish to watch them as they come and go, but, as we often say to each other in such moments, "Know thine enemy."

A tall man is being led down the front steps under the protection of Maudsley's umbrella. From behind, we note the man's dress as being particularly elegant, his suit having been exceedingly well tailored. The umbrella is lowered, and the man is helped into his carriage. He leans from the window to toss a disdainful coin to the mock servant, and the Captain's hand suddenly grips my arm; I had seen him too.

Once all of the company had driven away, our own party dispersed, and I am left standing at the window beside the Captain, gazing out at a bright, cold moon. She does not speak, and so I know that I must.

"You will not believe me, Captain, but that man was an enemy I once knew well," I tell her.

The Captain says nothing for a long while, then finally speaks.

"That was who you were running from when you jumped into the Thames..."

"Yes. But I am not alone in loathing that man, am I?"

The Captain is again silent.

"Despite your admirable self-control, my friend, you seized my arm a moment ago -- here is the mark to prove it. And I think I know why."

"Nobody knows why."

"I know that you had a sister once, and that she looked just like you."

The Captain turns to face me, and I see that her hands are trembling.

"How can you know that? I have never spoken of it."

"I also know that she was killed, and that, at the time of her discovery, she had very long hair, but that, at the time of her burial, she did not. That day, in the Bathing Court, the day your hair fell out, it wasn't your hair...was it? And when the servants at Bainbridge gossiped that the loss of the Count's eye may have been caused by the other sister, they weren't wrong...were they?"

"I cannot speak of this," the Captain whispers, turning away from me.

"Jolie, please...I am not speaking of this to hurt you. But this man has followed us from that world into this, and, if we are to have any chance of escaping his cruelty once more, we must help each other. We may perish here yet, but it must not be by his hand."

The Captain nods her head.

"I am so awfully sorry for what he did to your sister...for what he did to you. If the Count returns, I will do everything I can to keep him away from you. You have kept watch for us all these years. Let me keep watch for you now."

"But he hurt you too."

"What a man does to a girl he doesn't know is a terrible thing, but what a father does to his own daughters is infinitely worse."

"I fell asleep..."

"I know."



*I only sleep with people I love  
which is why I have never*



Asylum Letter No. XLV

Insanity is on the rise, or so they say, and a witch-hunt is spreading its deadly shadow over the country. Obsessively devoted to their cause, the medical community had first convinced the county heads, and their churches, that they must all increase their vigilance in the watch for any lunatics laying hidden in their boroughs; in turn, the county and churches instructed their flocks to observe their fellow citizens more closely, watching for any sign of madness -- any small deviance from the social norm. Commoners and gentry alike have been ordered to report any suspected lunatic to the local police, who will then send a madhouse representative to take the accused away. Ripe for a panic, the public has complied.

The friends and families of these exposed lunatics are not accurately told what will become of the abducted, and those who point their self-righteous fingers at their neighbors never regret their foolish and hasty act, because they never learn the true consequence of what they have done. Still, the people are always on their guard, afraid of being watched as they are watching others. Many families accuse their own, for they have been told that any hope of rehabilitation lay entirely in early detection, and removal from the home. The important thing is that the insane are going to receive treatment, and will, with the grace of God, be cured, and then delivered back to their homes better, saner members of society. What sort of treatment, and what exactly needs treating, is of little significance, for it is always safer to err on the side of caution. Right?

The country's insane asylums have eagerly taken advantage of the public's predilection towards fear, and are only too glad to accept the nominal sum they have been offered by our government for each new patient accepted into their care. Naturally, this encourages many less-than-upstanding superintendents to accept a greater number of patients than they can reasonably house, and many more than they can even pretend to care for; the asylums are full to bursting.

As for the Asylum for Wayward Victorian Girls, this means that our cells are crowded with the influx of new inmates, and this only increases the neglect, the ill treatment, and the unsanitary conditions for all. But, what can we do? At night, we lay with our bodies pressed together for lack of space, the fetid air stale and stifling despite the un-paned windows.

Collectively, we know that this cannot continue; eventually, someone must see that it is impossible to maintain even the semblance of a proper hospital under these conditions. There must be a public outcry against it; somehow, the people must know.

Something must change.



Asylum Letter No. XLVI

There is word amongst the Chasers that the Royal Lunacy Board will be dropping by for an inspection. Inspections occur only once a year, and are usually no great cause for alarm to the staff. The visitors drive up the steep incline towards our monument to misdirected funds, and are then led into the Entrance Hall, where the subterfuge of artificial architecture and servants play-acting as patients will impress them with the civility of our establishment. Look how much care has been taken to beautify the institution! Look how gentle and subdued are its inmates! A good lunch in Dr. Stockill's quarters, and several bottles of the Asylum's best port later, and the Board is generally delighted to affix their seal of approval and trot along home, spreading the good word, and leaving the Superintendent to run his enterprise as he wishes until the next visit.

But this time will be different. It is no random inspection of the facilities and the relative health of its inmates; people in the city below have spotted the vultures circling above our grounds, and have begun to raise questions. I pray that this is our chance -- that someone will come and look closer at last. All they have to do is open their eyes, and we will be free.

\*\*\*

This afternoon, a very large cart drawn by all of four great horses drove up to the Asylum gates. It carried an enormous wooden crate. It took ten of our Chasers to get the thing inside, and, once done, we passed several hours enduring the clanging and hammering that echoed up to us from the basement below before quiet finally came. It is now four o'clock the following morning, and I am waiting, as I always do, but the creaking of the Death Cart has not yet come. I know I should be relieved, but I'm not...





## Hospital Entry 26: THE JURY

I stand before the jury -- ten people with clipboards, pens raised and ready.

I banter on at top speed, attempting witticisms, apt observations, and generally being charming. I don't know why I do this. The visiting staff smile and laugh. They ask me if I'm famous (wouldn't they know it if I were?). They ask me what sort of music I play (maybe they ought to ask the nurses in their glass, guitar-proof safe house, the nurses who have been using the office computer to visit my website, listen to my music, look at my pictures, read my interviews...am I not supposed to be anonymous here?).

They do all this. But they don't let me go.

Why do I get the feeling that they are only keeping me here to find out what happens next?

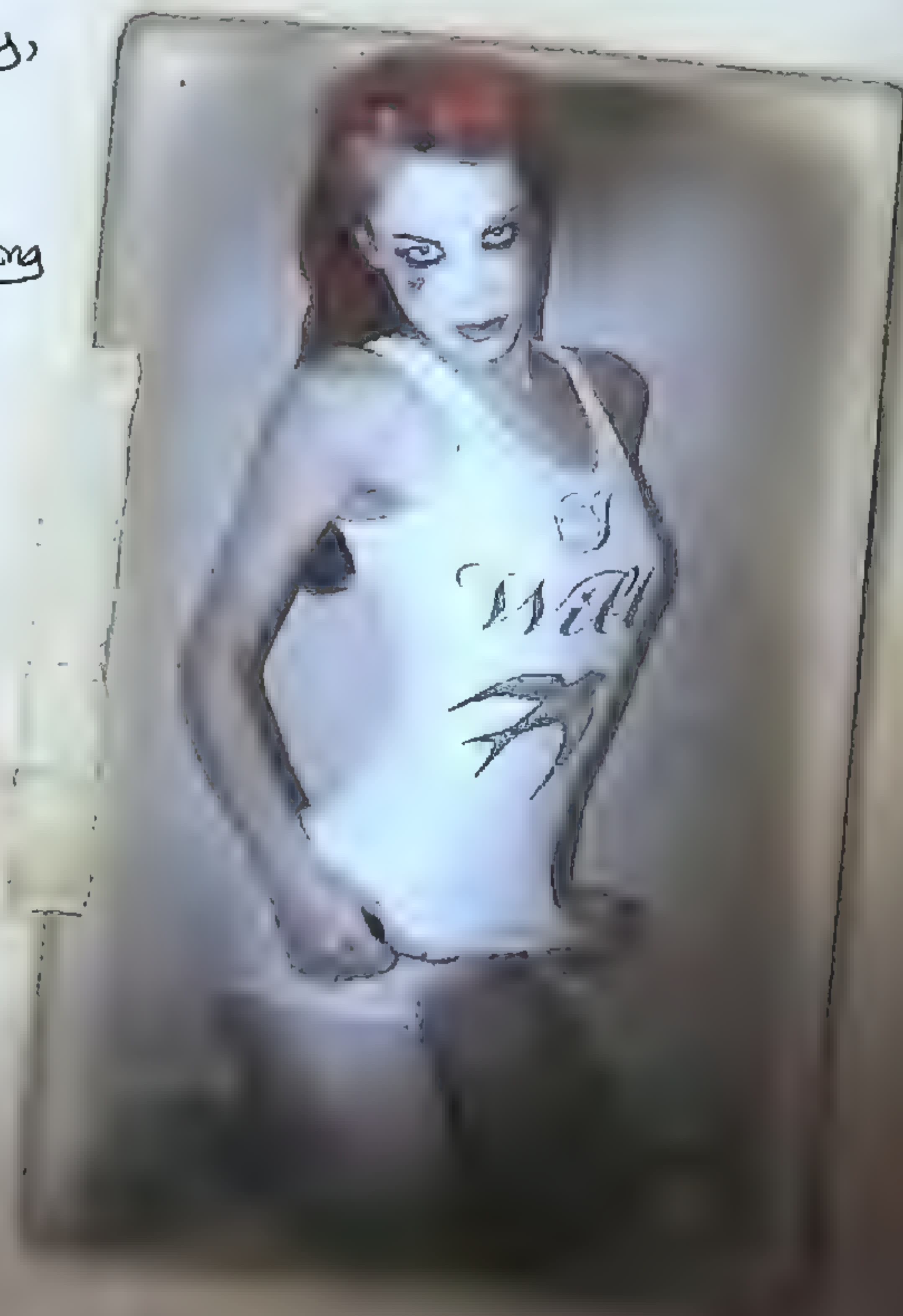
Dr. Sharpe accused me of being here for the sake of research. But maybe I'm not the one writing a book.

This at all worth writing down now is that I never thought that it was worth writing down. My whole life, I thought everybody saw, heard, and felt things in this way. I've talked about it for years as though it were perfectly ordinary, and it is only upon asking all of my acquaintances that I discover it isn't. It is precisely because the notes and corresponding colors trigger an emotional reaction that a piece by Bach in the key of "b minor" is not only the color "blue", but potentially suicide-inducing.

Just a small chart containing a few associations:

### Notes

A = Brown  
B = Dark Blue  
C = Cream  
D = Golden  
E = Yellow  
F = Brown  
G = Rust



## Asylum Letter No. XLVII

As the doctors immerse themselves ever more into their "work," the Chasers are becoming ever more violent. The brutes are frustrated by the greater number of inmates they are now charged to monitor and control, and they are taking out their annoyance on the only ones here who can't fight back. Us.

We must be careful not to show any real affection for one another, for the Chasers will beat, strangle, or even hang one girl in front of the other by her own stockings if the girls are believed to be friends -- yes, this is how dangerous things have become. The Chasers do this not because they fear our conspiring. They do it because they enjoy doing it. We have developed hand signals to warn each other of approaching staff, and we strike our stolen spoons against the bars of our cells in an attempt to distract the visiting Chaser from inflicting these horrors upon whichever inmate he's set his eye on. It doesn't always work, but we do our best to minimize the damage.

This, Diary, is my favourite quote from old Maudsley, who has, over the years, been elevated to the rank of Senior Asylum Attendant:

Maudsley: The girl is bedevilled, I swear it, Sir! I've beaten her with the heaviest chain I could manage, and still she revolts. What more can I do, Doctor?

Dr. Stockill: Do it again.

As for our Superintendent, Dr. Stockill's experiments continue day and night. He does not sleep, and his face is growing even more pale and gaunt than it already was, with deep, red rings surrounding those merciless eyes that burn with his consuming obsession.

Dr. Lymer has performed a record number of lobotomies this month, and Dr. Greaves continues his butchery, with the result being that those of us who have not been sliced to death are either dead in our minds or deathly ill, suffering from infection, paralysis, and a hundred ailments that have no name.

Those who do not mend quietly disappear, and still no Death Cart. The wards have become silent. Terror reigns.

### Letters

A = Dark Red  
B = Dark Blue  
C = Cream  
D = Golden  
E = Yellow  
F = Brown  
G = Rust

H = Brown  
I = Gray  
J = Yellowish Brown  
K = Yellowish Yellow

L = Cream  
M = Dark Purple Blue  
N = Brownish Orange  
O = Reddish Black  
P = Greenish Bluish Black  
Q = Brownish Black  
R = Botae  
S = Yellowish Green  
T = Light Greenish  
U = Black  
V = Yellow  
W = Black

### Numbers

1 = Cream  
2 = Dark Blue  
3 = Green  
4 = Salmon  
5 = Brown  
6 = Pale Yellow  
7 = Golden Orange  
8 = Green  
9 = Gray  
10 = Combination  
11 = Silver  
12 = Blue  
13 = Blue  
14 = Blue  
15 = Blue  
16 = Green  
17 = Golden Orange  
18 = Green  
19 = Green  
20 = Blue  
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100 = Green



Asylum Letter No. XLVIII

Through our solitary view of the world outside of Ward B, we can see that nearly all of the vultures have flown away. We cannot guess what might have been done to accomplish this, but the Londoners are satisfied, and the inspection of the Asylum has been called off -- there will be no visitors this year. The wind howls as it blows great torrents of snow into our cells, rotting our beds of straw with the dampness. But, strangely, the Wards are warmer, despite the frigid weather. The entire institution is warmer in fact, and, thus, our collective health has bettered slightly. It is hoped that improvements are finally being made for our benefit.

Yet, things are not as they should be. Girls have been disappearing at an even more alarming rate than usual. Entire cells are empty for the first time. When the Death Cart had been making its nightly rounds, there were only as many missing from the breakfast table as the cart could hold. Now, there are twenty, thirty, forty girls simply vanishing every single day, and no one knows to where.

I must learn what is happening to the missing. I am certain that it has to do with the recent delivery made to the Asylum, for that has been the only alteration to our establishmen in ages. What was in that box? And what could it have to do with the girls' mass disappearance anyhow? I know that whatever it was that arrived that day is now in the basement, but the basement is massive, housing the entire motorized workings for the Asylum's theatrical scenery as well as the many other mechanical oddities our Superintendent has designed. Still, I am determined to find my way down by whatever means possible before things get any worse -- before it is too late.

\*\*\*

I return to you, Diary, after an eventful absence, during which time my raw and ragged hands were needed elsewhere. I will now endeavor to faithfully recount the days that followed my entry above:

After a failed (and well-punished) attempt at sneaking away from the breakfast table and into the kitchen, where I wrongly believed I might find a staircase going down to the basement, I decided to take inspiration from Veronica and try my hand at bribing not overheard. In the end, my lofty goal suffered a lowly death as I managed only to get myself caught and thrown into Quarantine. Sir Edward and Basil had stowed away in earth and settling into the blackness, I heard a sound from directly beneath us, a low rumble. My eyes adjusting to the dark, I watched as Sir Edward leapt from my same. The two rats scurried about the cell, pausing after every few steps to press their heads to the floor, their whiskers twitching. At last, Sir Edward raised the soil were thin and weakest. I cleared a layer of dirt from the boards below enough, and Sir Edward and Basil set to work, shredding the wooden beams with their astonishingly powerful jaws. Not an hour later, an opening had been made, and a shaft of light infiltrated our cell from below. Putting my face to the ground, I could see directly into the basement.

The chamber beneath us was cold and cavernous, without any real furnishings, as though it had only recently been occupied by humans. A makeshift laboratory had been constructed, and hanging gas-lamps encircled a wooden slab in the center of the room, distinguish the outlines of machinery -- massive gears and wheels, levers, cogs, and chains surrounded an iron closet, large enough for perhaps six people to stand inside.

A curtain was hung around the shoddy operating table, drawn open and tied off to one side. I saw Dr. Stockill and another man bending over the slab, engaged in the inspection of something a third had just deposited there. When the men raised themselves, I could see the body of a girl I thought I recognized from Ward A. She was clearly dead, her limbs limp, her face blue and bloodless. One of the men whose face I could not yet decipher was stripping the dead girl of her striped stockings, tossing them into a large bin already overflowing with such garments.

"I don't mind touchin' the live ones," he said, "but I'm not too keen on strippin' the dead. 'Course, that's just me."

"Your delicacy is admirable, young Charles," remarked Dr. Stockill in his emotionally vacuous and oft-employed tone of insincerity, "but there's no need to burn the stockings. We pride ourselves on wasting nothing here, don't we, Greavesly?"

The third man turned, and I saw that it was indeed our own Butcher, just as I had suspected. I noticed then that more naked bodies were piled nearby, one on top of the other, and, stockings removed, the girl on the table was tossed onto the pile like nothing more than a piece of discarded meat thrown out by the kitchen staff. My stomach convulsed; I felt dizzy, but I couldn't look away. The bodies were fresh, looking as though they had been alive only an hour before; their eyes were open, their blank stares like dead fish at market.

"Stockill," grumbled Dr. Greavesly, "I don't know why you insist upon killing the sluts before throwing them into the furnace, especially since you refuse to have any fun with it. It's a waste of time, I say, not to mention a waste of those precious chemicals you spend every penny on. We'd be filthy rich if you didn't squander so."

"So that's where the Asylum's profits go," I thought.

"Your vulgar methods, Greavesly, disgust me immensely. You would no doubt have me slit the things open and roll about in their innards if you could."

"Well, and do you fancy you're being kind by doing things your way? You're too weak to be a proper doctor, I say."

The Butcher slurred as though he had been drinking, which did not surprise me.

"I am not weak," barked Dr. Stockill with a sudden intensity that startled even his opponent, "and you would be wise to curb your tongue while you continue to work under my protection."

Protection? What did that mean?

"Oh foxpiss, Stockill, calm down for fuck's sake...you'll spill your Cyanide."

"And besides," muttered the Superintendent, turning back to his subject, "I have not the slightest interest in the bodies of these...abominations, nor do I have any interest in being "kind," as you seem to imagine. It is entirely selfish, you see."

A vicious smile spread across Dr. Stockill's thin, grey lips.

"Both my study and my pleasure are derived from this moment here...it intoxicates me..."

His voice grew distant as he spoke, as though he were slipping away into some other world -- one that he alone inhabited. The Superintendent snapped his fingers, and Charlie, the very Chaser who had led a chained Veronica to my cell on that first day in Ward B, brought forth yet another inmate, this one still living. The girl's hands were bound behind her back, and a gag was tied over her mouth.

"On the table!" Dr. Stockill directed, impatiently. "I don't need to handle the thing, for Heaven's sake."

Charlie forced the girl onto the operating slab, then retrieved a set of straps from a nearby shelf.

"No, no, you imbecile, that won't be necessary." The Doctor bent over the patient. "She won't be going anywhere, will you, my dear?"



The girl shook her head. Producing the elegant, fan-like weapon from his breast pocket, Dr. Stockill touched the trigger; the blades sprung open, and he selected the razor attachment, deftly using it to slice the rope from the prisoner's wrists, and the gag from her mouth. Snapping the blades back into concealment with a flick of his wrist, the Doctor then brushed the honey curls away from her face. I cried out, but Sir Edward leapt in front of my face, stifling me before I could give us away completely.

"It's Christelle!" I gasped.

Dr. Stockill instantly raised his head.

"Did you hear something just now, Greavesly?"

The surgeon had lit an opium cigarette and was puffing away at it.

"Mmm? What's that?"

"Put that out!" shouted Dr. Stockill.

"What the devil?"

"Idiot! You'll have us all killed! Don't you know you can't have an open flame near these chemicals? No, of course you wouldn't know that. You butchers never do."

In his excitement over the cigarette, Dr. Stockill had forgotten all about the noise.

"You cannot help her now, my child," whispered Sir Edward into my ear, "but you must not die tonight as well."

"Sir Edward is right, you must keep yourself alive for the sake of the others as long as you possibly can," agreed Basil, grasping my fingers in his delicate paws. "They need you, Miss Emily, and there may yet be something you can do for them."

I could say no words, but I knew the rats were right; whatever lay before us all, at this moment, there was nothing I could do but watch and pray. I knew that it would benefit my sanity to turn and run to the other side of the cell, playing the old familiar music in my head to drown out the voices below, but I couldn't leave my friend and sister alone. Somehow, she must know that I was with her.

Dr. Stockill had returned his attention to Christelle. His spindly spider's fingers were around her throat now, and he bent down to look closely into her eyes; they were wide with terror, and she trembled violently. Christelle tried to speak, but the Doctor gently pressed a long forefinger to her lips.

"We will have no noise," he said, his voice taking on that silvery, persuasive quality I had heard so many times. It was when he used this tone that he was at his most dangerous.

Christelle nodded.

"If only obedience would save her," I sobbed to the rats.

"I am not a cruel man, you see," said the Doctor. "I am going to give you something that will make all of this go away. But first, there is something I need you to do for me. Can you do it?"

Christelle nodded again.

"Good girl. Now, I need you to listen closely to what I am about to tell you. There is, behind you, a closet made of iron. Inside that closet there is a door. That door opens into a small chamber fitted with heating elements, elements that can reach a temperature hot enough to turn a cat to a pile of ashes in less time than it takes to brew a cup of tea." Dr. Sharpe had encircled his victim's soft, white neck with one impeccably-manicured hand. "In just one, brief moment, I am going to put you into that closet."

Christelle's eyes flooded; she made a small, desperate sound, like a dying animal. She tried to shake her head, but the Doctor only tightened his grip. I was screaming on

the inside; I was so powerless -- so pathetic.

"Do you understand what I am telling you?" sneered Dr. Stockill.

Christelle was now frozen in shock. Her lack of response frustrated the Doctor. All of a sudden, he leapt onto the operating table and climbed on top of the poor girl, one hand twisting its way through her hair and grasping it firmly by the roots, his other hand clamping even tighter around her throat. Dr. Greavesly moved closer, viewing the scene with rabid fascination.

"Do you understand what I am telling you?" Dr. Stockill was snarling rabidly in Christelle's face now, baring his teeth like a wolf. "You will suffer as you have made me suffer! This is all your doing! You tried to take her away from me! Why? Why? Why?"

With each of these last three words, the Doctor pounded Christelle's head against the slab.

"Good God, man!" exclaimed Dr. Greavesly, rushing forward to push Dr. Stockill from the table. "Have you gone entirely mad, Stockill?"

"Don't touch me!" spat the Superintendent, but he soon collected himself. Straightening his waistcoat, he turned towards a side table laden with rows of bottles and jars. Taking up a bottle of amber glass, he dampened a rag with its contents.

"You are amongst the lucky ones," he said, returning to Christelle, and adopting his deliberate tone once more, all of the feral passion of a moment ago having drained from his being. "You shall never feel the pain of your flesh melting away from your bones."

Christelle looked up, her blue eyes pleading for mercy. Then, my breath stopped as these same eyes shot directly to where I hid, meeting mine in the dark, as though she knew I was there -- as though could feel my presence. The blood gushing from the back of her head had already soaked the wood beneath, and soiled the floor in a steady trickle.

"You shall not feel it, my dear, because you'll already be dead."

The good Doctor quickly clapped the liquid-soaked rag over Christelle's mouth. Her face transformed from terror to despair, then, finally, to nothingness, and her eyelids fluttered to a close at last. I died as I watched her die; I could not realize that I knew was in me. I could only feel relief that it was over...that her suffering was over.

Dr. Stockill had been studying Christelle's face closely as she expired, as though he were recording it in his memory to recall and write down at some later hour. He moved swiftly, mechanically, again producing his bloodletting device. I now saw he had freed her hands; as one who had performed the act a thousand times before, the Doctor pragmatically cut a deep, wide slit in Christelle's wrist. He pressed a rag against the gash, and, when it was saturated with fresh, warm blood, he took the razor, snapped the blades shut, and gingerly deposited the soiled cloth into a metal box.

Turning away from the body in evident disgust, Dr. Stockill left the body.

"Take the parts you want, Greavesly. Just get rid of her."





# A

## Asylum Letter No. XLIX

I was still in Quarantine a day later, and going mad at not being able to warn the girls of what was coming; of course, I did not delude myself that knowing would alter their fate, but they need not go to their deaths like ignorant cattle being led to slaughter -- they must not. I had sent Sir Edward and Basil back through the bars and down the long tunnel leading forward through the Asylum and into the Entrance Hall by way of the massive hearth, the very mouth of which had swallowed me up into the belly of Hell so long ago, never to return. The two rats were to assemble the League, then command their fellows to warn all inmates to be on their guard. They were then to summon every last rodent in all of the Asylum and station them throughout the Wards, and under strict orders to attack any who came near with the combined strength of every tooth and claw.

Something was going to happen. I did not know what, but I knew that we were facing the final chapter of our horrific history; things had gone too far -- become too monstrous -- to continue on as they were. This was the end; we were being exterminated. We were in the laboratory rats, and we had multiplied; the lunatic witch-hunt outside had sent in their multitudes, and the Asylum had welcomed them, along with the income they brought. But now, the facilities were overrun, the staff was overwhelmed, and we were being cut down to size.

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Night fell, and a red moon shone through the bars high up in the wall. I was roused from an exhausted daze by the sound of footsteps in the basement below. Click...click...click... It wasn't Dr. Stockill...no, I knew these steps. I had not received word from Sir Edward, nor from any of the Plague Rats, and I hoped with all my heart that the girls were being protected as best as could be done with what few resources we had.

A gas-lamp was lit, and a musty, yellow ray shot up into the cell. I crawled towards the light and pressed my face to the opening. Madame Mournington. I watched as my Headmistress lit still more lamps, walking amongst the shelves stacked with glass tubes, bottles, and piles of blood-stained rags. She must have returned earlier that evening while the staff were sleeping. Pausing to lift a small bottle from the table, Madame Mournington examined its contents, then put it down again, only to take up another. Moving on, she passed her hand over the door of the metal furnace, and turned the heavy iron wheel that opened the operating slab in the center of the room and drew aside the curtain that concealed it. Another body had been laid out. The inmate's shift was spotted with blood, no doubt the result of another botched abortion, or perhaps her uterus had been removed, maybe even a kidney, a heart -- who knows? I had been unconscious when the new inmate was brought in. Had she been alive at the time? Madame Mournington seemed startled to see the body, and retreated from the table. Then, she did something I thought very strange: Moving back to the table, she placed her withered hands on the edge, and breathed deeply -- a long, drawn out breath, eyes closed and chin raised as though she were taking in the scent of something unknown, and trying to discern what it was. Why should that be odd, you ask? Because I know, with all certainty, that Madame Mournington has no sense of smell...none whatsoever.

At last, she bowed her head, but our Headmistress stood this way for a very long time. At last, she bowed her head, but still she stood, perfectly still... From a part of the basement hidden from my view, I heard the creak of a door, and Dr. Stockill emerged. Hurriedly he walked, carrying a heavy case of chemicals. Upon seeing his mother, he stopped short. Slowly, he set down the case, then drew a handkerchief from his pocket to wipe his brow; he had gone white.



"Mother..." he said, his voice thin and tremulous, "I did not realize you had returned. What are you doing down here? Why don't you come upstairs and let me bring you some tea? The journey has surely exhausted you."

Madame Mournington had her back to the Doctor.

"Mother, please...come upstairs, and tell me of your week in Coventry. I trust Aunt Augusta is well? Please, Mother, come...this is no place for you..."

For the first time since I had known the man, Dr. Stockill sounded frightened. Finally, Madame Mournington spoke, but she did not turn to look at her son.

"There was a part of me that always knew..." she quietly said.

"Mother, please..."

"I always knew, and yet I did not believe it. How could I? How could a mother think such a thing of her own child?"

"Mother, please...you don't know what you're saying...you're tired--"

Madame Mourninton turned to face him at last, a rag quivering in each of her outstretched hands -- a rag just like the one Dr. Stockill had used the night before to cover Christelle's mouth.

"My son...my son, you know well that I cannot...I cannot smell a thing...and yet, I can smell these. How can that be?" she begged him; "You are a doctor...a good, learned doctor -- can you tell me this? I can smell the body of this girl...it is on her breath still... Tell me, Monty, my son, my own boy, my only...was she awake when you put these rags over her mouth? Did she cry? Did my daughter cry?"

Madame Mournington's voice had become strained and tight, like a thread ready to snap. The rags fell from her hands. Her son advanced towards her, but she backed away, retreating to the other side of the table as if she were truly afraid of him.

"Almonds...cherries...peach pits..." she said, sniffing the air again.

Seizing the amber glass bottle from the table where the Doctor had left it the night before, Madame Mourninton studied the label.

"Cyanide...poison. How would you have obtained such a thing at that age? Oh, but you had your ways, didn't you? You were always a sly one...always hiding...always lying...always...KILLING!"

"Mother--"

"You took from me the only thing that ever gave me an ounce of happiness...that ever gave me a single shred of joy. You robbed me of my child -- my baby. You robbed me of my life. I could have been human -- I could have been alive, but you took my heart and you murdered it... You made me into this! A hard, bitter, cruel old woman who can feel nothing...my God, what have I done...what have I done..."

Nervously fingering the Ward Key hanging from her waist as it always did, Madame Mournington turned away, still holding the bottle.

"I am your child, Mother," said the Doctor, but slowly, treading carefully now.

"You are not my child. You are a monster. And why?" She was pleading now. "Why did you do it? She was your sister! Your own blood!"

The Doctor cringed at that last word.

"I had to, Mother," he answered, with terrifying calm. "I couldn't let her steal you from me, could I? I couldn't share you. You can understand that, can't you? I did it for you, Mother -- for us."

"You're mad...you're truly mad..." gasped Madame Mournington in disbelief.

The Doctor began walking towards her, and, this time, she had nowhere to retreat to.

"Don't come near me!"

"Mother, I had to...I hadn't any choice--"

Dr. Stockill froze mid-step as his mother lifted the bottle of Cyanide.

"Because of you, I have wasted my life in misery," said she, an eerie tranquility having possessed her. "Because of you, I have nothing. Because of my own pain, I have hurt others without a thought. But you will never understand this, because you are dead inside. And now, so am I."

Madame Mournington raised the bottle to her lips and drank its contents in one, quick swallow.

From Dr. Stockill came a high-pitched scream, and he ran to his mother as the bottle slipped from her hand, crashing to the floor, releasing the overwhelming scent of almonds into the air. As the glass shattered, some of the shards must have flown in his face, for the Doctor fell to his knees and covered his eyes. Madame Mournington saw her son's brief incapacitation as her chance to flee the basement, but the Doctor was soon on his feet again, and he raced after her, shouting for her to stop.

I heard quick, sharp footsteps heading down the tunnel towards the Quarantine gate...towards me. It was pitch black, but a light was nearing, and I saw Madame Mournington. She undid the bolt and threw open the gate. I stood before her in utter astonishment. She was breathing hard, and could not speak. She clutched at her stomach, her face twisted in agony. Her skin was flushed, and her lips were flecked with foam and blood. Groaning, she lurched forward. The sight was awful; I backed away from her. This was the same woman who had robbed me of my one chance at freedom on that wet London night what seemed a lifetime ago; she had fulfilled the request of a murderer, charging me with the crime of horrors to die by torture instead. She may not she had locked me inside a house of horrors to die by torture instead. She may not have held the knife, but she was a part of this just the same. What could she want with me now? Her body contorted in violent convulsions, yet she managed to locate the Ward Key from within the folds of her heavy, grey skirt. She broke the chain that attached the key to her waist, and then...she held it out to me. Stunned, I could not move to take it. I stared into the woman's face and saw that the eyes I still believed had once been beautiful were wild with anguish and desperation. Holding the key that had taunted me for so long, her trembling hand still reached out to me, as though begging me to take it from her -- to relieve her of her burden at last. Finally, I managed to move my feet; I stepped towards my Headmistress and cautiously accepted the key. Having accomplished this one, solitary act of kindness, she stumbled to the ground, and with her dying breath came the hoarse whisper, "RUN AWAY!" Her body writhed upon the dirt floor, and, with one final convulsion, and a harsh scrape sounding from deep within her throat, I knew that Madame Mournington was dead.

But the Ward Key...it was in my hand. It was actually in my hand. I took up the dead woman's lantern and raised the key to the flame. "Liberty!" it called to me. Then, noise from somewhere in the building roused me into action; I knew that Dr. Stockill was hunting for his mother; it was only a matter of time before he would find her, and I must be gone when he did. Past the open gate, I ran as fast as I could through the tunnel, emerging from the hearth, my stocking feet sliding into the Entrance Hall. One of our hideous grey ghosts flew in front of my face, cavernous eyes wide, the gaping black hole of its mouth forming the word, "RUN!" as a piercing shriek from all corners of the Asylum echoed the same, rising in volume as I raced onward. Grasping the Ward Key ever tighter in my hand, I bolted up the several flights of decaying stairs, only just avoiding my own demise as the rotting wood snapped beneath me and the railings gave way, smashing upon the ground below; I heard the grinding of the gears, the rattle of unseen machinery, and I knew that Dr. Stockill was securing the Asylum. Still screaming for his mother, the Doctor ran through the endless rooms, the sound of breaking glass and toppling furniture following him as he went. Surviving the staircase, I reached the barred landing of the Lunatic Wards. I fit the key into the lock and turned it; that old familiar click, and I was in! Once through the bars, I unlocked the doors of both Wards, and, from a nail in the wall outside of each, took up the two rings of smaller keys used by the Chasers to lock us in our individual cells and letters. I began with Ward B, for I knew that it would take more time to free the chained and caged than it would to loose the girls in the less confining Ward. With the Ward Key between my teeth, I unlocked Cell W14 and tossed one of the rings to the Captain, giving her instructions to free every last inmate, and to be quick about it. I repeated the procedure in Ward A, and, within seconds, a flood of



girls and the rats who had been guarding them came pouring forth from the Wards, and onto the landing. I raced towards the gate, an army of little girls and the entire League of Plague Rats behind me when, in the midst of this chaotic muddle of stockings, claws, and tails, I stumbled, and fell flat on my stomach. I watched helplessly as the key launched itself from my hand, shooting away like a bullet across the filthy floor towards the open gate and out of my reach. Time stopped; I was back in the gilded foyer of Bainbridge, and Anne was sliding the Master Key across the marble floor, but then it had been coming closer, and now it was moving further away.

And then, a black-shod foot came down, stopping the key and concealing it from my view. I raised my head to see Dr. Stockill towering above me, a seething fury in his red-rimmed eyes. Without a word, the Doctor snatched up the key and turned back towards the gate. Instantly, I was on my feet again, and, before I knew what I was doing, I lunged at the Doctor, leaping onto his back, sinking my teeth into his arm in an attempt to get back the key I was determined not to lose. The mass of inmates and rodents rushed forward to my aid, but my emaciated limbs were no match for my opponent; he had pocketed the Ward Key and now shook me off, pulling me close in front of him. My back was pressed against his chest, and his hand clenched around my throat just as he had done to Christelle. With his free hand, he reached into his breast pocket and drew out the gleaming, silver weapon, snapping it open and holding a razor to my neck. The Doctor had transformed into something so contrary to the refined portrait his guests were greeted with when they first crossed the Entrance Hall downstairs; he was a different creature entirely -- a wild, rabid, snarling beast.

"What is she worth to you?" he growled, his blade already carving a shallow line across my throat.

Seeing the blood, my army stood down. With a demonic cackle, the Doctor shoved me back into the crowd, then ran out and down the stairs, locking the gate behind him.

It was unbearable -- we had come so close, and now we were further away than ever, for, within moments, the staff would be alerted to our escape attempt and we would be done with, once and for all. It was over. All these years of holding on, and it was over. I sank to the ground, knowing that we were all dead. I believe that most of the girls were too astounded to completely comprehend what had just happened; all they knew is that we were almost free, and then we weren't.

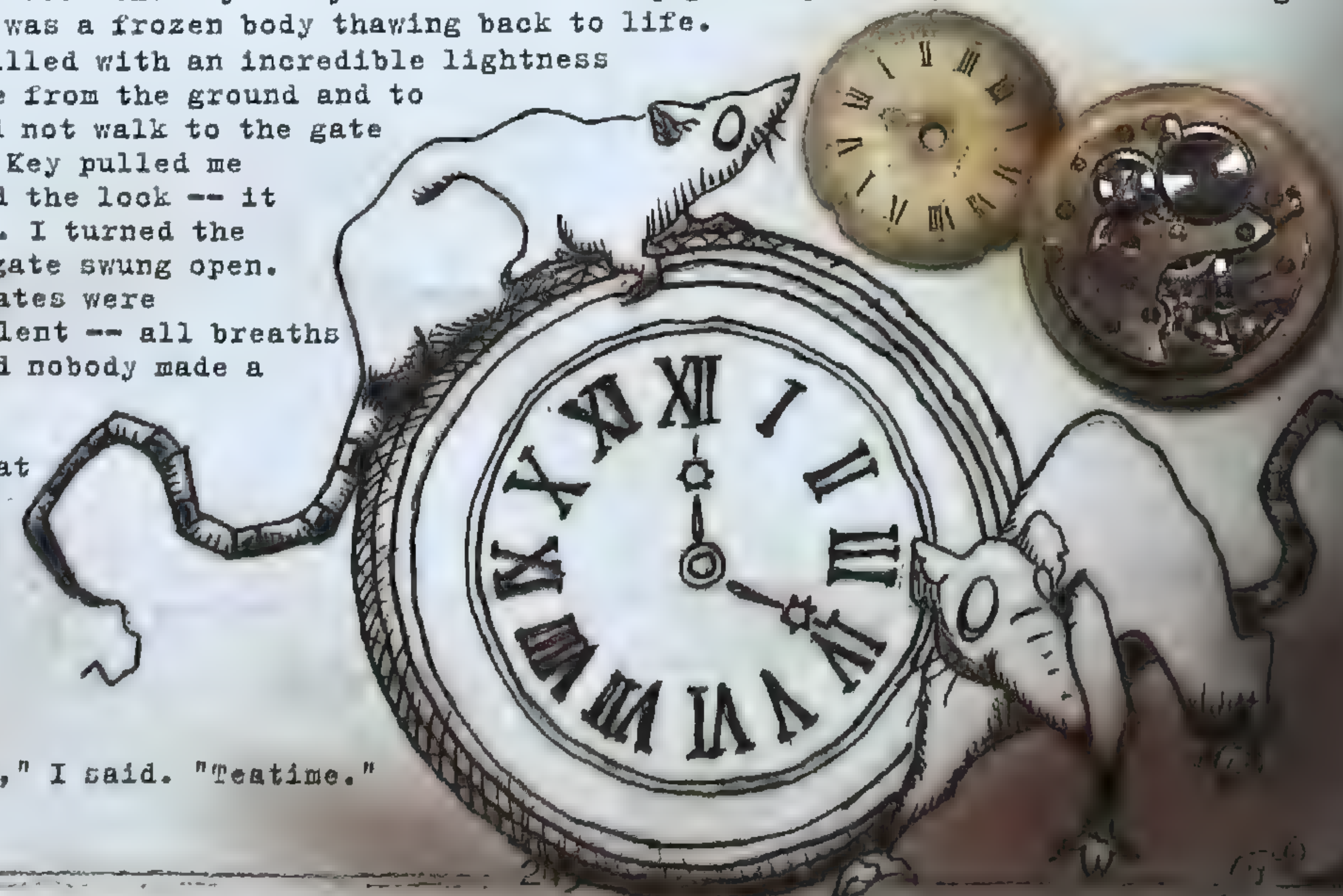
I cannot understand what happened next, Diary...I can only tell my story and allow you to come to your own conclusions:

As I knelt upon that cold, stone floor, I became aware of a peculiar burning sensation upon my right leg. It took me a moment to realize that the heat was coming from inside my stocking, just above my knee, where Anne's key, the Master Key of Bainbridge, was tied. The tarnished gold burned with a growing warmth; I tore off the stocking and untied the key as quickly as I could. The metal was glowing white-hot now, but it did not pain me. I took the key in my hands and felt my pulse quicken, the blood coursing through me; I was a frozen body thawing back to life.

Then, I was filled with an incredible lightness that lifted me from the ground and to my feet. I did not walk to the gate -- the Master Key pulled me there. I tried the lock -- it fit perfectly. I turned the key, and the gate swung open. My fellow inmates were completely silent -- all breaths were held, and nobody made a sound.

Then, the great clock in the Entrance Hall below struck the hour.

"Four o'clock," I said. "Teatime."



## Asylum Letter No. L

Blood was everywhere. A dozen Chasers were dead with many more soon to follow, Dr. Greavesly's surgical tools having been put to good use at last.

After locking us inside the Ward Hall, Dr. Stockill had sounded the alarm, waking everyone in the institution at once. For the first time in the Asylum's long and gruesome history, the inmates had the clear advantage: We outnumbered the staff, and we had nothing to lose. It was not difficult for us to kill -- not difficult at all; it simply needed to be done, and so we did it. The Asylum's greatest experiment was one that its venerable directors never expected: After years of mental and physical torture, suffocated at every turn by impending death and pure inhumanity, what would we become? What might we be capable of? The Tea Party Massacre was the answer to the question they never asked.

The doctors were yet to be dealt with; we needed the pawns out of the way before we had our real fun. Because the furnace had supplied the Asylum with the easy means to carry out mass extermination, only a few hundred of us remained, a horrific contrast to the thousands there had once been. Still, we had more than enough in our ranks to strike terror into the hearts of our captors once we were on the other side of the bars.

The bulk of our army had been sent to search the building for any remaining Chasers, for I was sure that there were pockets of them hidden in the Asylum's multitude of dark recesses. "Offense at all costs!" I had directed the girls, for we had all agreed that no one could be left alive. Whilst one of our factions hauled its prisoners to the Hydrotherapy Chamber (would the Chasers respond to the treatment, or be pronounced "incurable?"), the members of the Striped Stocking Society assembled in the Operating Theatre for a brief discussion on how best to approach the doctors; they had no doubt tucked themselves away in their foxholes, thinking up ways to survive the onslaught and take us down instead; thus, we had to be especially cautious. We concurred that a select few of us ought to deal the primary blows, while the rest would guard the area and restrain the "patients," should they prove uncooperative. A strategy decided upon, we armed ourselves to the teeth with the Theatre's surgical tools, and, finally, it was time to visit our good doctors.

While one might have expected the devils to save their own, the doctors had fled to their separate corners. They had heard the dying screams of the Chasers and medical assistants echoing through the halls, and realized that we had gotten hold of their instruments of healing -- the butcher knives, razors, drills, syringes, saws, and more... Sir Edward arrived to report that Dr. Stockill had locked himself in his laboratory, but we all agreed to save the best for last.

Dr. Lymer had retreated to the Bloodletting Wing. The door was locked, but that obstacle was easily overcome; I raised the heavy amputation hatchet I carried and split the lock from the door with a single blow. We found Dr. Lymer huddled beneath his table of leech jars and bleeding bowls, armed only with a solitary hammer as though he had never been required to protect himself, and didn't know quite how to about it. This was too easy. One of the Plague Rats scurried past the table carrying the severed hand of Dr. Lymer's chief assistant in its teeth, and dragging it across the floor.

"Well! Look what the rat dragged in!" said I, as Dr. Lymer cowered under the table. The girls rushed forward and hauled this deplorable worm of a man to one of his bleeding beds. He howled and pleaded for mercy, but we had no intention of negotiating; no compromise -- no fear. We worked quickly. The Doctor wriggled like one of his salted leeches, and so the others held him down while I buckled the leather straps over his chest and limbs. Having taken up a handsome selection of



blades, scarificators, fleams, and lancets, we tore away the Doctor's nightclothes, and determined to find out what it was like to be on the other end of a razor blade. A handsome variety of carvings were made over Dr. Lymer's body (some very artistically done, I might add), taking care that his sickly, bloated face was well attended to. Long slashes ran across his chest, while the scarificator was used to gnaw a decorative series of slits down the length of his arms and legs. The Captain took particular pleasure in pounding the bladed chisel into the veins of the Doctor's fat wrists with his own hammer. When we felt that Dr. Lymer was sufficiently sliced and on his way to good health, the Captain, Veronica, and I each chose a full leech jar from the table.

"Hello, my slippery water friends!" the Captain cooed to her leeches. "This is your lucky night!"

On the count of three, we emptied the jars, pouring the leeches over the shrieking Doctor's mutilated body. His blood, having overflowed the shallow moat running around the edge of the bed, was now dripping onto the floor; although he had lost much of it, the Doctor was still living, which was exactly what we wanted. The leeches needed no instruction; they spread rapidly over every exposed inch of flesh.

"Oh! I almost forgot!" I exclaimed, addressing the Captain. "Care to do the honours?"

I handed her the silver lobotomy spike I'd been using as a hairpin.

"How kind of you, Valentine! Don't mind if I do."

"You might feel a little pinch," I whispered in Dr. Lymer's ear.

The Captain raised her spike and drove it into the center of the Doctor's forehead just before the leeches covered his face completely. The shrieking stopped. His eyes rolled back in his head and he went slack-jawed, unwittingly inviting the leeches to crawl into his mouth and stop his breath forever. It was a fantastic sight; Dr. Lymer was covered from head to toe, smothered by a glittering, black armour writhing with life. Our work done, we left our former tormentor, bidding our bloodsucking assistants "bon appetit."

Next, it was on to Dr. Greavesly's private quarters. Our modest army reached his door and found it unlocked, the surgeon nowhere to be seen. We knew that we must find him before he found us, and I felt absolutely certain that he had gone to the Operating Theatre to arm himself, just as we had. We raced up the stairs, through the Theatre door that Dr. Greavesly, in his haste, had forgotten to lock, and there was the demon, the butcher, crouched upon his table, his fiery mane wild and loose around his bestial face. He gripped a long surgical knife in each hand and was waiting for us, like an animal ready to pounce.

"Oh no! Little girls! Whatever shall I do?" he taunted, cackling, and rising to his feet.

Without a word, Veronica stepped forward, unsheathed a small blade she had strapped to her thigh, and sent it spinning expertly towards the surgeon. Before he had time to realize what had happened, the knife was deeply embedded in his thick, ruddy neck. We were stunned silent.

"Wow..." whispered Flea.

"You've done that before, right?" asked Joanna.

"No..." gasped Veronica. "I mean, yes, but...I hit my target...I finally hit my bleedin' target!"

Adding injury to injury, the Doctor had hit his head when he fell, causing him to lose consciousness. Thus, we felt no need to waste time by tying him down -- we must not forget Dr. Stockill, for he could be escaping the Asylum at that very moment. Leaving Veronica's knife protruding from the surgeon's neck, I took up the rustiest, filthiest butcher knife I could find, and plunged it into Dr. Greavesly's stomach. Much to our surprise, he opened his eyes and roared, blood spurting from his throat. I leapt back; the others pinned down the surgeon's arms and legs. Even with his brute strength, he could not overpower us all. Before I could finish the job, Veronica leapt onto the operating table, grasped the knife I had left standing upright in the

Doctor's stomach, and pulled it downwards, slicing through the length of his abdomen. With one last, guttural howl, Dr. Greavesly's head fell back, and he was dead. The Captain stepped forward to inspect Veronica's work.

"Nice, clean cut," she remarked.

"Indeed," I observed. "And he's certainly not hysterical anymore."

Now able to devote our complete attention to the Superintendent, I knew we had to take extra care. By far the cleverest of the three doctors, he was much more likely to have planned a defense that might actually succeed. Wiping our bloody hands on our shifts, we ran up the stairs to the Doctor's laboratory door, followed by a growing swarm of Plague Rats. Their long teeth shone red in the gas-light; they had been aiding the rest of the girls in finishing off the staff, and now they had come for their prize; after all, they had as much of a grievance against Dr. Stockill as any of us.

I asked Sir Edward to station the League just outside the door with the rest of the inmates until I called for help. Basil, who had, during the past years, observed the Superintendent more closely than anyone, objected to my going in alone, but I felt certain that, when confronting Dr. Stockill, a crowd would do more harm than good. There was no sound from within the laboratory, but I knew he was there. The door was unlocked. Slowly, I turned the latch and tiptoed into the room, knowing that, at any time, the Doctor may leap out at me. He was at once the maddest and the most intelligent of our enemies, and, thus, the most dangerous. Besides, weapons were one thing, but chemicals were quite another. The laboratory was filled with that same almond scent I had first experienced only a few hours ago, and now knew the deadly significance of. I moved as silently as I could, but the boards creaked beneath my feet, the sound amplified a thousandfold to my anxious ears. I looked in all directions, but saw no one. Then, the door slammed shut; I raised the knife I carried and spun around to see Dr. Stockill standing behind me. Looking like lunacy itself, his hair was wet and tangled; a ghastly, twisted smile spread across his face. In one hand, he held a vial of clear liquid -- in the other, an unlit match.

"Turn around," he said, his deathly calm contrasting his appearance. "Turn around and leave this place. I don't care where you go now -- just get out."

"And if I refuse?" I had my knife pointed towards his chest, putting me in a position to be disagreeable.

"You once obliged me by explaining how you had once wished for death...do you still wish to die? And what about your wretched whores? I light this match and combine these two simple elements, and we're all dead."

"I see you are beginning to understand me, Doctor," I said, meeting his calm, yet keeping my knife at the ready. "So you wish to die, then?"

"I asked you first," he replied.

Just then, I had a peculiar idea. I walked a slow circle around the Doctor; he turned his body to face me, just as I hoped he would. His back was now to the door.

"I cannot help but suspect that you are bluffing, Doctor."

"Your affection for your fellow inmates renders you powerless, doesn't it... Are you willing to risk all of your lives on a mere suspicion?"

Must try again.

"Perhaps I am. I find myself strangely attracted to risk, Doctor. It is in my nature -- I can't help it."

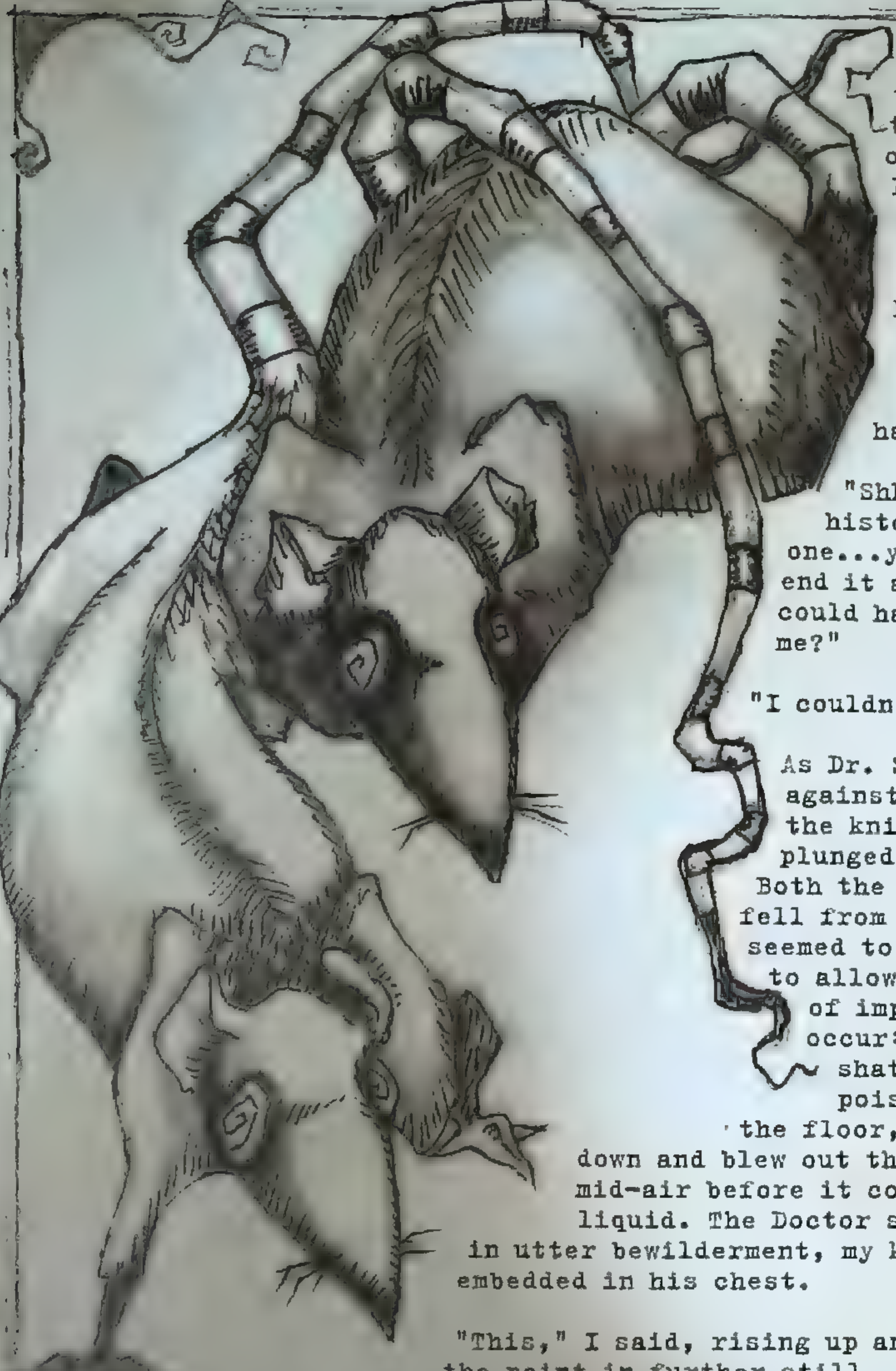
Finally.

Without a sound, the door opened a crack, just enough for Sir Edward, followed by Basil and the rest of the rats, to creep unheard into the laboratory.

"And your friends? Do they share your lack of self-preservation?" goaded the Doctor.

I watched over Dr. Stockill's shoulder as the swarm of rodents swam up the leg of the





tables, onto the shelves, even up the chains to the gas-lamps hanging overhead. "You hesitate," said the Doctor. "Be wise, W14-A."

His collar had come undone during our earlier struggle for the Ward Key, and so I flicked my knifepoint to press against his bare throat.

"Don't call me that," I snapped. I have a name. I have a NAME!

"Shhh...be wise, Emily, Emily with no history, and no last name, and no one...you've come this far. Why would you end it all now? I am but one man, and you could have the whole world. Why bother with me?"

"I couldn't sleep," I answered.

As Dr. Stockill struck his match against the nearby table, I released the knife from his throat, and plunged it deep into his heart.

Both the vial and the flame fell from his hands, and time seemed to slow just enough to allow this next series of impossible events to occur: The vial

shattered, its poison now covering the floor, but I crouched down and blew out the match in mid-air before it could touch the liquid. The Doctor stared at me in utter bewilderment, my knife still embedded in his chest.

"This," I said, rising up and driving the point in further still, "is for the girls who couldn't be here today."

"And this," called Sir Edward, from the lamp directly above our heads, "this is for the rats!"

"What?" cried the mortally wounded Doctor, having never heard a rat speak before that moment.

"Nevermind," replied Sir Edward.

All at once, every Plague Rat in the Asylum pounced upon Dr. Stockill. Screaming in absolute terror, he collapsed beneath their combined weight, and the vengeful rodents clawed at his eyes and tore him apart with their bloodstained teeth until there was nothing left.

*Sir Edward  
on the  
gaslamp*

## Asylum Letter No. LI

The morning after the Tea Party Massacre. It is turning light outside, and I have just now finished relating all that has happened to this point, for I knew there would be no sleep until the story passed out of me through my little silver pencil. I can hear birds, which have always seemed to stray from their route just to avoid this place, whistling in the trees outside. Does the world know that a mark upon its soul has been blotted out? Will the sky be any clearer today? The air any sweeter?

On Dr. Stockill's mahogany desk lies the Asylum's appointment book, that which had once been governed by the iron claw of Madame Mournington in the days before she felt morally incapable of booking the sort of appointments that were required of her -- the days before The Cell. Opening the book to today's date, I see that there is one thing we have left to do.

The bell rings in the Entrance Hall, announcing a visitor. The Captain stands facing the door in her pirate's hat of striped wallpaper and apothecary orders. The length of braid that the inmates and I had woven for her is slung across her chest like a military sash, and a little black rat is perched upon her shoulder where a parrot ought to be. I go to her and hand her the long surgical knife that I have meticulously cleaned and polished for just this occasion. The Captain looks down at the rough hilt in her graceful hand. The bell rings a second time.

"Are you quite sure you want to do this alone?" I ask her.

"Yes." She breathes deeply. "I'm ready. You just keep watch."

"Aye, Captain..." I say, then ascend the staircase to attend to the other girls.





Asylum Letter No. LII

The rest of the day was spent in the basement, gathering the bodies of the girls who had not yet been incinerated, and then preparing them for the first proper funeral that had ever taken place on the grounds of the Asylum for Wayward Victorian Girls. We also arranged a ceremony and chose memorial locations for both the rats and leeches who had died under the old guard. The inmates crafted tiny leech tombstones bearing the names of those we had known well, and the League itself had kept faithful records of all they had lost over the past several years, which numbered into the millions.

A towering pyre was made in the field over the Pits that still concealed the corpses of all who had ridden unwittingly in the Death Cart. We laid our newly dead on top of the pyre, and covered them with the branches and wild rosemary we had found growing nearby. Rosemary... "for remembrance," says Ophelia... a symbol that our girls will not be forgotten.

As the sun set behind the bordering trees, a very curious procession emerged from the Asylum doors: Walking one-by-one, each girl wore clean stockings, and a wrap of table linens for warmth; our bandaged hands held lanterns and tall ivory tapers. We were flanked on both sides by rows of Plague Rats; they walked slowly with us through the courtyard and around to the side of the building, where the field lay. When we reached the Death Pits, we formed a circle around the pyre and raised our flames. My heart was full with memories of all the friends I had lost -- girls who had died unidentified, unclaimed, and unimportant, but who were here with me still. I lowered my taper to the heap of sticks and fragrant brush, and so followed the multitude around me. As the flames rose higher into the glittering heavens, we threw back our heads and sang until our throats were dry.



Asylum Letter No. LIII

It was the night after the Tea Party Massacre that we decided to stay.

Returning from our makeshift funeral, we gathered around the great hearth in the Entrance Hall, surrounded by cups of tea and everything from the kitchen pantry that was even remotely edible, our bodies slowly remembering what it was like to be warm. I tried to play the old harpsichord for a bit, but I knew we had much to think upon, and I soon joined the other girls around the fire. There, we discussed our options.

One inmate claimed to have an uncle just outside of London; perhaps he could take some of us on as maids in exchange for low wages, if he was still living, that is. Another knew of a public house that might hire one or two of us as barmaids under the same conditions, if it still existed. More suggestions were proposed, each one more utterly impractical and entirely impossible than the last. The most qualified among us was no better off than the least; a girl who may once have been employed as a teacher of children or even a seller of hats would never again be allowed even these small opportunities. It would only be a danger to return to our families, most of which wouldn't even be there anymore, and wouldn't want us if they were, as they clearly hadn't wanted us before.

Where could we go but the streets? If the criteria for madness were still what we knew them to be, surely it would not be long before we would be imprisoned all over again in one asylum or another. And, if we did succeed in avoiding recapture, what was our place in the world? With no money, no connections, and worse, a bad name eternally attached to all things unsavoury, the best we could hope for would be occasional employment as seamstresses, a job that could never pay the most meager of expenses, or frequent employment as prostitutes, a job that we had all had quite enough of, thank you very much. No respectable household would ever hire us, not even as below-stairs kitchen maids. No, once we had driven through these gates, we were dead to the world, and just as well, for I did not think we could keep kept even those lowly positions if given the opportunity; we had been removed from the world too long to ever fit back into it. Having exhausted all of our imaginary resources and still finding no realistic solution to the problem of where to go now that we were free, the house had gone quiet.

"I do not think," I said, after a time had passed, "that I shall go anywhere at all."

"What do you mean?" the girls asked. "You intend to stay here? In the Asylum?"

A new life was slowly unfurling inside my brain. I was feeling the space around me and stretching my fingers to see if I could fill it. I was breathing the corrupted air and wondering if I could cleanse it of its poison.

"I think," said I, "that I mean to hold tightly to the freedom I have just won. If I step back through that gate, I become property of the world again, and I do not think that I can be anyone's property -- anyone's anything -- anymore...not ever. Can you?"

I saw that my fellow inmates were turning over this new idea to look at it on all sides. They did not say "yes," but they did not say "no," and, little by little, I saw the gleam, gone for so long, return to Jolie Rouge's dark eyes.

"Yes, I shall stay," I resolved. "I shall devote my life to making my prison my palace. Just think of it, ladies: An Asylum, by definition, ought to be a sanctuary for those who need one, and I fear I shall always need one. But, how lonely I should be!"

I looked around at my dear, cherished friends.



"For, who will steer the ship? And who will share my tea? And who will teach me to throw a knife properly? I think I would be very sad to go through my whole life never knowing how."

In the days that followed, the doors were open, the girls were free, and nobody left. We needed each other. The Asylum was ours now, and finally, we belonged here.

STATUS WITHIN THE ASYLUM:  
"LIFER. PERMANENT RESIDENT.  
NO CHANCE FOR RECOVERY."



We have quarantined ourselves.





Asylum Letter No. LIV

It didn't take long to clean up the Asylum. The furnace came in quite handy for the disposal of the doctors and staff, and then the basement was boarded up; no one ever need go there again.

The funny thing is that we thought we had eradicated our collective enemies, but the truth is that we never will. After being tortured and imprisoned for so long, we don't know what life is without this anymore. We had not felt ourselves change, but, gradually, we had become so accustomed to such monstrosities that, now that we are free, we feel strangely drawn to them. Consider the leeches as an example: Many of us had made peace with our blood-sucking companions long ago, and we continue to apply leeches to ourselves and to each other even though we no longer have to. They are our friends, after all, and they had been prisoners too -- abducted from their natural habitats just as we were; they have names, and voices, and, well, they must be fed.

All of the cruelty has gone out of it, but we often bind each other in manacles and straight waistcoats. It has become a game to us -- we hold contests to see who can escape their restraints the quickest. Some of our girls take great pleasure in performing imaginary operations on one another. We customize the wheeled metal beds from the Bloodletting Wing, and race them down the same corridors we used to dread. We have found a thousand uses for the instruments of our torture, claiming them as our own, and reclaiming ourselves in the process.

The Plague Rats remain an important part of every aspect of our lives here, with the ever-protective Sir Edward watching over us all. He disappears now and again, just as he has often done these past years, but we always know that he will soon be back, and Basil takes the Ambassador's place while he is away. The rats sit with us at tea, drinking from our cups, nibbling the crumpets and scones and teacakes, for we have such things now. In fact, we have every material thing that we could wish for, and far more than that. Under the Asylum's old regime, our tyrant-jailers had absconded our belongings immediately upon arrival; they had sold some of our goods, and spent some of our money, but still there remained hidden chambers filled with treasures amassed over time -- more than we needed to live as frivolously as we pleased for the rest of our days.

At first, I could not fathom why Dr. Stockill had approved the selling of our bodies before the selling of our valuables, but then it came to me: I knew that the Doctor had spent a veritable fortune on his continuous supply of chemicals, but, more significantly, once his anticipated Plague infected the public, neither we nor our bodies would be of any use to anyone anymore -- the world outside would have many more pressing concerns to attend to than the worry of when they could next schedule an appointment to fuck a mad girl, and they certainly wouldn't care to purchase our aborted fetuses anymore, nor our limbs, nor any other part. Yes, we may have been valuable for the time being, but, come doomsday, all that would matter was gold. Best to hoard the treasures and save them for that inevitable rainy day. Naturally, our celebrated Superintendent could never have imagined that the rain would fall upon himself instead.

Of course, I had arrived entirely bereft belongings, but many of the girls had been deposited here by wealthy families who, either convinced by their own ignorance, or pressured by society's ignorance, that their wards were mad, left them, indeed, but not without full purses, having been given to think that the girls would be well cared for, and better cared for the more valuables they brought with them. Only too easy to fool, these guardians believed all this and had continued to send money, if only to ease their own consciences, never knowing that improved conditions could not be bought -- not for any price.

The Asylum had been governed by masters of deception, but it could not be denied that our directors preyed upon those more than willing to be deceived -- who could be so easily led into doing evil. Worse, those who had a girl committed never knew what evil they had done, for no one ever told them. No one was ever informed when a girl had died, and very few of those who brought us their mad ever returned, or even wrote to inquire after the progress of the "cure." The few who did inquire were sent a stock notice stating that the girl had only just passed away, and were placated with a death certificate stating the date and cause of death (always false, with the date invariably listed as "yesterday," and the cause invariably listed as "pneumonia"), as well as a long list of all beneficial medications and treatments that had been administered at the time of crisis in an attempt to show that everything possible had been done for the poor girl in question. In reality, of course, these medications were never given -- those that were administered had only been part of cruel, nay, perverse experiments, and were never intended to treat any legitimate condition, even when it did exist. If a girl had happened to actually develop pneumonia, which was a frequent ailment due to the outdoor baths and the eternal cold, she would be disposed of immediately for fear that the staff and the entire institution would become infected. The Asylum did not deal in cures.

Besides ordering goods by post, we rarely have, nor need, direct communication with the world outside. It is imperative to our survival that no one ever know of what has taken place in the Asylum. We now govern ourselves, and we will never submit to anyone. It was decided between us that, if the world never cared to know of the violence inflicted upon us, then the world ought not care to know of the violence that we had finally inflicted back.

There is but one thing that weighs heavily on my mind, and this is only because it is something I cannot share, and so I bear the burden alone: Just before dawn on the day after the Tea Party Massacre (which we now refer to simply as "The Tea Party"), I had entered the Operating Theatre so that I could select a suitable knife for the Captain, for she wished to greet the The Cell's final customer herself and finish the job she had started back at Bainbridge. We had left Dr. Greavesly dead upon the operating table the previous night, but, upon reentry, I found the table empty. Frantic, I ran to the window just in time to see a lumbering figure, hunched over and limping, moving through the early morning mist and into the black woods behind the Asylum. I knew that he would most likely die out in the merciless cold, and that, should he live, he would not be back. Still, utilizing and, in the process, learning from Dr. Stockill's ingenious mechanical inventions until I was able to design such things myself (which, as it turns out, I have a particular knack for), I did take care to implement an elaborate system of traps and alarms -- something I had intended to do anyway -- and now I am not afraid, nor do I feel that anyone else ought to be.

At the very start of our new life within the Asylum, we had decided that we would continue to accept new inmates. In the event that a girl was as un-mad as most of us were, then she might prove a pleasant addition to our strange society, and, if the girl truly was mad and in need of serious care and rehabilitation, then perhaps we could make the Asylum for Wayward Victorian Girls what it always ought to have been: a place of safety and shelter. A sanctuary. An asylum.

And this, Diary, is how Sachiko came back into my life. She was delivered one May morning in the hansom of a police constable who had found her walking backwards on a railroad track just outside of the London. When Sachiko arrived, she refused to speak, and was so entirely catatonic that she did not recognize me, her oldest and dearest friend. But, as the months passed, my former companion was gradually revived into her former self, and even better. We all have our battle scars, and Sachiko has not yet been able to tell me precisely what happened during those years that we were separated, but someday perhaps I will know the story, and, in truth, it little matters. We try our best to look to the future and leave our painful past behind. We are learning to live again, and, for many of us, it is for the first time.

Each time a new inmate arrives, we enjoy a little play-acting of our own: One of us will take on the role of Madame Mournington for the benefit of the girl's guardians. The actress of the day will don a sober grey gown, her hair coiled high and her nose turned up in an effort to emulate our deceased Headmistress's air of irigid superiority. Once the doors are closed, however, everything is different.

The first girl I had admitted myself was a quiet little thing, prone to bouts of melancholia, and with good reason. Her maniacally pious uncle had discarded her into the Asylum's doorstep, and so I took her hand and whisked the bewildered creature



through our labyrinth of rooms, Basil perched upon my shoulder. Past the kitchen we went, where we nabbed a slice of cherry cake and met Joanna, who was playing with the pet leech she liked to lead about on a fine and jeweled chain. Munching our bounty as we rushed along, we traversed the Drawing Room, where Veronica was instructing a gathering of girls in the fine art of knife throwing, then poked our heads into the Music Room, where Sir Edward was leading a circle of young rats in the recitation of his favorite Browning poem. Suddenly, from somewhere upstairs, a piercing scream reverberated throughout the Asylum; the new inmate's eyes widened in fear.

"The new electro-shock machine..." I told her. "You'll learn to love it."

What we are building is a self-sufficient community like nothing that has ever before existed; it could perhaps be a bizarre but beautiful social experiment on what might happen if women were ever made the mistresses of their own lives. The ultimate result of this experiment remains to be seen, but I believe that we are creating something truly remarkable.

Yet, despite our best efforts, I do not suppose that we will ever know happiness as other people do -- people who have never suffered as we have. I reckon that the reason we now indulge in our luxuries and tea parties and dances and music and all things beautiful and exotic and grand and even frivolous is simply to make up for the reality that, no matter how many years are left to us, there will never be enough time in our lives to fill the hole that had been made inside of each of us when we were driven through the Asylum's massive gates, never to return again. Revenge itself may indeed be the best revenge, but slaying your enemy does not give you back what they stole from you. There is not enough revenge in the world for that.

Still, we do our best to live as blissfully as we can, and I dare say we have great fun trying. We have reformed the Asylum in every aspect, from the kitchen to the cells and even the flat rooftop over the Wards where we often gather for tea and dancing, or simply to look down upon the city of London as the sun sets -- the same city that I had once marveled at as I stood barefoot in the middle of the bridge with Anne at my side. I am equally far from the city now as I was on that day, but I am no longer running towards it.

I do not know that our tastes in decor would please the eye of civilized society, but I suspect they would not. Our sense of aesthetic has come to lean heavily towards the macabre, but not because we mean it to; it is simply that the bits of us that measure what is beautiful, what is ugly, what is comic, and what is frightening had been tossed up into the air when we were shut away from the world, and, now that we are free, the pieces are falling back down in a slightly different arrangement.

We have lowered the veneers in the Entrance Hall and replaced the ghastly paintings hung there with dozens of our own works -- portraits of our insect and rodent companions, as well as of each other, for we have many gifted artists in our midst, and we are not afraid to show ourselves, raw and imperfect as we may be. In fact, we now find our scars beautiful, nothing less than a testament to our will to survive.

We have collected the skulls that filled the closets of the Operating Theatre, and, in our attempt to honour our fallen sisters, we have strung them up with dazzling crystals, lustrous pearls, and braids of our own hair, crafting them into the most fanciful chandeliers imaginable. The Theatre itself has become what, in a way, it had always been: a theatre in the round, such as Shakespeare himself would have known; it is now the stage for our plays and larger concerts, the laboratory serving to accommodate our more intimate productions. Naturally, the Theatre had to undergo a significant transformation so that simple act of stepping inside would not cause us all to relive the terror that this place had once inspired, but it wasn't enough to cover the bloodstains. No, we have had to realize that, like de Rothsberg's eye patch, we can never pretend that something isn't there just by covering it up. We must own our surroundings as they are -- own everything that comes with them -- and make them what we wish them to be. We have denied as much as we could to arrive at this day. We cannot deny anymore.

This is how it was.  
This is how it happened.  
But THIS is what shall happen now.

Perhaps it is this taking of ownership that allows us to utilize the things that should be unbearable to our eyes and assign them a new purpose. The leech jars have

become precious porcelain to us. We use them as decorative vases and fill them with branches from the dead tree garden we have planted over the Death Pits.

We have between us girls of every conceivable talent, from bakers, who craft the most exquisite creations from pastry and spun sugar (and who enable us to have High Tea at both four o'clock in the afternoon and four o'clock in the morning), to writers of great brilliance, to master musicians, of whom I am proud to count myself amongst, and who keep our extraordinary household supplied with music, for there is always music, and Sachiko and I play our Mozart duets until dawn, and for royalty as we always said we would, for we are the kings and the queens, and this is our territory.





Asylum Letter No. LV

It was New Year's Eve. We had enjoyed the most glorious Christmas, and the scent of pine trees and gingerbread still filled the Asylum. While many of our girls were passing the winter in teaching themselves to skate on the frozen surface of the Bathing Court, I had given myself the task of creating a perfect miniature Asylum replica in gingerbread for the Plague Rats. But it is the the turning of the year that has been my favourite holiday at the Asylum since we attained our freedom. On the Eve, we hold our annual Tea Ball upon the rooftops of both Ward A and Ward B, and it is the affair to transcend all other Asylum affairs, and those in the city as well, I am quite sure. In preparation for this year's Ball, I had devoted months to the composition of a new musical work to be presented at midnight, and the girls in the kitchen had planned a lavish, highest-of-the-high tea, with a three-meter croquembouche, a pirate ship made entirely of sugar, and enough champagne sent up from London for every girl, every rat, and any multiple personalities who might unexpectedly turn up. Veronica was to debut a new burlesque act (which she promised to be nothing short of "nymphomaniacal"), and I had been practicing a choreographed swordfight with the Captain for weeks. On this most magical of holidays, it is our tradition to dress in white from head to toe as a symbol of our resurrection, and, this year, I thought it particularly meaningful, for I felt that we were finally growing into our new life; though our phantoms would never leave us, our demons were almost gone.

The Ball was soon to begin, and we ascended to the rooftops in anticipation of the evening's first dance. Following us were the Asylum ghosts, their wispy figures swirling about our skirts as we climbed the old staircase, emerging from the corners and behind the walls to join us for our greatest celebration of freedom and unity. This would be our night of all nights.

At last, it was time. I had marked either side of the path leading to the rooftop dance floor with a trail of teacups housing flickering votives, and every girl was now in her place. As the band sounded the first note of the evening, a blinding shower of sparks exploded into the star-filled sky -- that had been my surprise for my fellow inmates. The revelry commenced, and, my God, the sheer joy exuded from each soul in communion was overpowering. Though it was winter and tiny flakes of snow had begun to fall, we were warmed by our dancing, by large fires set in the great stone urns about the roof, and, truth be told, by our liquid refreshments as well. I know not why, but I began to feel inexplicably overwrought, almost as though I were too happy. I left the crowd to go and sit alone for a moment; I had not been away long when the Captain found me, bearing a teacup filled with delicate, pink champagne.

"Do you remember, Captain, a Sunday morning very long ago when I found that poor rat dead in the soup pot?"

"I will never forget that day."

"Dear Lord, that was awful soup... Anyhow, it was on that day that I remember realizing with complete clarity that we truly were prisoners, and that all hope was lost...it overwhelmed me."

"Yes, sweet Valentine, but you have led us into a new life...you created hope where there was none, and now just look what we have!"

"I know, and I am so happy... But that's just it -- I feel as though tonight is the very opposite of that morning...as though...as though I have just realized with equal clarity that we are free, and, not only that, but even more free than we ever dreamt of being -- than almost anyone is, anywhere, and..."

My cherished friend held me in her arms. The girls of the Striped Stocking Society rushed towards us with gleeful shouts, pulling us up and onto the dance floor with the other revelers. Determined to enjoy this moment, I took a deep breath and swallowed the contents of my teacup. The music swelled, the dancers twirled, and I spun around madly, lifting my face to the sky, the fragile snowflakes settling upon my flushed cheeks. It would soon be time to look to the constellations and welcome in the New Year with cheers, music, and still more fireworks. And finally, I did it -- I had managed to break through my past, through my memories, the things that overwhelmed me and held me back from the life I wanted, keeping some secret part of my being embedded in the life I had long escaped. My happiness rose within me like a white light, shooting from my toes to my legs and up through my raised arms to my fingertips, and I thought, "This! This is what freedom really feels like!"

Suddenly, I fell to the ground. Sachiko came to lift me up, but I told her I was all right, and stood on my own. Then, we both fell. The rooftops were shaking, and our beautiful scenery was crashing down around us. Everyone stopped and listened as a deep, yawning groan rose from the very depths of the building we stood upon. This unearthly noise was immediately followed by the sound of crumbling brick and stone. I looked around and realized that the Asylum was collapsing. Iron bars were snapping out of cell windows as the structure around them was crushed under its own weight. And then, entire sections of the tenement began to fall. I heard the words of Sir Edward on the night I had first met him in Ward A...he had told me then that the Asylum was built directly on top of the city's trash heap, that it was only built to deceive, that it had no foundation at all, and that it was never, ever meant to last. It had always been a front -- grand from the outside, but inside, merely mistake built upon mistake, flaw upon flaw upon flaw... The massive construction had simply reached its limit. Every wall that had miraculously stood for all these years had given in to the inevitable at last, and, like dominoes, once one began to fall, the rest followed. How could I have thought that this could go on forever? Panicked, the inmates hurried about in their voluminous white gowns, frantically trying to find a way down to the ground, but the exits were either blocked or had already fallen away. And that is when the flames broke out. The increasing snowfall did its best to contain the blaze, but I knew that, within minutes, we would be engulfed. Time stopped and I was on the ceiling again, only this time the ceiling was the glittering midnight sky. Stunned, I watched as hundreds of inmates, in an act of astonishing acceptance, lined up on the roof's ledge and began to jump -- some alone, many holding hands, their skirts billowing around them, soft curls flying every which where...it was breathtaking. "Suicide," I thought, "is a cold, ugly, desperate thing, and, when it happens, it is always lonely. Suicide is not the beautiful and poetic act that our painters portray." But the truth is that, in that moment alone, it was.

I stood looking over the ledge at the ground far, far below, and I thought of Anne -- of that night when we stood leaning over the rail of the bridge together...of how the moon had shown us a different path that neither the Count, nor his friends, nor his hounds, nor anyone, could follow... In perfect peace, I stepped up onto the ledge and extended my hand to the Captain.

"Well, where shall we sail to next, Captain?" I asked her, so that all around me could hear.

Our eyes met and, smiling, she leapt up onto the ledge beside me.

"An entirely new destination, I think! The routing has only just been mapped, and we shall be the very first to explore it if we board the ship at once."

Sachiko climbed up and bravely took my other hand. Enormous sections of the roof we stood upon were simply falling away, and the flames were close behind us.

"Anchors aweigh!" shouted the Captain, raising her ancient pirate's hat high into the air. The last of the inmates took their places on the ledge, and we all joined hands. I called out to them for the last time.

"Goodnight, sweet ladies, goodnight..." And then, we jumped.



Hospital Entry 27: MISSING

It's four o'clock and I can't sleep. I feel sick. I refuse to believe that the Asylum is gone...that it really, truly collapsed...Emily dead...all dead...all over...I cannot...I will not believe it really happened...this is not how it's supposed to end. I need to see the letter again. Is it really to be my last? Can I survive this place without Emily? Without all of them? I don't think I can do it. I don't even think I want to do it. I'm starting to panic. I need to get out of this room. I need to get out of this hospital. I reach down into my stocking to retrieve the last letter...I wish there were some fucking light in here...

Something isn't right.

The paper feels different. It isn't the waxy, delicate parchment I had touched only a few hours ago. It is thicker...rough...with texture but without form. I leap out of bed and open the heavy plastic curtains to look through the bars for a sliver of moon to see the letter by. But I am not holding a letter. I am holding...what is it...it looks almost like...a napkin -- like the coarse, brown paper napkins in the psych ward bathroom...

I race to the locked doors, pounding them with my fists, shouting for the nurses to let me out. I'm yelling that it's an emergency. My cellmates turn over in their beds, but they are too drugged to care about the noise. Finally, a nurse comes running and the heavy doors open. The artificial light in the hallway is blinding.

"Emilie! What are you doing?" asks the nurse, pulling me outside the bedroom.

"Somebody has been taking my things," I tell her.

Am I having a panic attack? I can't breathe.

"Somebody has been in my things. Somebody has been in my bed. Somebody in that room took something of mine, and I want it back right now. I don't care what time it is -- this is not OK. Right now. Right now. Right now."

"Emilie, you have to calm down; we don't want to wake everybody, do we? Now, come along with me and we'll get you something to help you sleep. You've had a bad dream, that's all. We can switch up your medication and see if that helps."

"No! I don't want any more of your fucking drugs, and I don't want to fucking calm down. I want you to go in there right now and wake everybody up and find out who took it!"

"Took what, Emilie? What is it you're missing?"

I am not going to explain this to her. I need my notebook.

"Nothing...it's nothing. May I please get a personal belonging from the closet?"

"No, Emilie, not now -- you'll have to wait until morning. Let's go. Come with me."

"Please...please...please, all I want is my notebook and I promise I'll calm down. I will be so fucking calm. Please...I'm saying please..."

The nurse pauses -- this is not allowed.

"OK, Emilie, you can have your notebook, but only for five minutes, and then you have to go back to bed."

We walk down the hall toward the closet. The nurse's hand is on my shoulder. She is trying to keep contact -- to anticipate my next move. She unlocks the closet door, but before she can pull the string to turn on the light, I am inside, digging through the boxes to locate my own. I feel for my notebook. The light comes on and I find it. Notebook in hand, I turn and walk quickly into the Day Room. "Don't run," I tell myself.

"Emilie, let me give you something."

The nurse is following me.

"No, thank you, leave me alone. Leave me alone. Leave me alone."

I walk away from her. I know I am repeating myself, but I don't know why.

"All right, but five minutes, Emilie. I'll come back to get you."

I hear the nurse return to the glass booth; she is talking nervously to the other nurse on night watch. I sit down on the old green couch that I had shared with Violet that day...that day when she had told me... I am tearing through the pages, looking for my Asylum letters, but they are not here. Between the pages where the letters ought to be are the same brown paper napkins, then a paper menu from the kitchen, then more napkins, another menu, more napkins, tissues, the wrapping from a teabag...there is scribbling on the rubbish, some in red crayon, some in pen, scribbling, just scribbling... I bolt from the Day Room and pound on the booth where the two women are sitting and drinking coffee. One is on the phone, and the other comes to the window and talks to me through the small opening at the bottom, just like a ticket window at the movies...it's just like a ticket window...like they're selling something...

"What is it, Emilie?"

"Somebody has been through my notebook and taken my letters. This is not OK. You can not do this. I want to know who did this, and I want my letters back. Now. Do you hear me?"

"Emilie, nobody has been through your notebook. We don't do that here -- your belongings are your belongings, and we respect that. Anything that was there is still there."

"That is a lie! You're lying to me! Get out of that fucking cage you cowardly fucking bitch! Get out and fucking look at this!"

The nurse emerges from the office.

"All right, Emilie, show me what's missing. Nance, will you get something for Emilie to take?"

"Look. I had letters in here. Here and here and here...between these pages...dozens of them...a hundred...they are all gone, and there is a bunch of garbage that I did not put here. Somebody has been in my notebook and replaced my letters with fucking napkins and...and...trash. I need to have my letters back. Please," I am pleading now, "can you please find out where they are? I just need them back. I need them back. I need them back. I need--"

"Emilie, calm down, deep breath...come on now, give me one deep breath. That's a good girl. Now, let's look at this together. Let's see... The writing on this napkin looks like yours, doesn't it? And this one...this is your writing, Emilie. Can't you tell?"

It is my writing. It is my writing that goes from an elegant print to an unrecognizable scrawl and then back again...I have never understood why I can't just write in one normal style like normal people do. It is my writing. It is unmistakable. But it is impossible.

"No, this is wrong. I don't remember writing these. I didn't write these. I don't even know what they say...this is all gibberish...it doesn't say anything..."

Wait a minute.

"How did you know that?" I ask the nurse, quietly.



"How did I know what, Emilie?"

"How did you know that's my writing? Why would you know what my writing looks like?"  
I'm not calm anymore. "WHY WOULD YOU KNOW WHAT MY WRITING LOOKS LIKE?"

Oh god...Violet was right...they've been in my notebook...they've read everything...

"No, this is not right at all... No. No. No. No. No."

I am slapping the wall with each "No." I can't stop. Nancy, the other nurse, returns; she has brought one of the armed security guards back with her. An enormous beast with hideous breath, he calls me "sweetheart," and grips my shoulders tightly. Nurse Nancy forces the pills into my mouth and tries to pour some water from a tiny paper cup down after them, but it only ends up on my face and spilling down my chest, soaking my hospital gown.

I hear myself screaming. The notebook is on the floor, the napkins and other trash scattered around it. I think I just kicked the guard who has hold of me from behind. Dr. Sharpe is rushing through the double iron doors that guard the entrance to the Maximum Security Psych Ward. He is walking toward me and I am trying to run away, but I can't. What is he doing here at this hour? Is he always here? Does he live here? Does he have a camera on me? Is he fucking watching me all the fucking time? I am screaming at him to get away from me. I don't want him to touch me. The guard lifts me off the ground as if I am no heavier than a lapdog or a throw pillow, and Dr. Sharpe directs him into a room just off the hallway as I flail my limbs, trying to escape the giant's grasp. The guard is laying me onto a sterile, white bed with a cold metal frame, and Dr. Sharpe is strapping me down. He is strapping me down. I am being strapped down.

My vision is getting blurry...I can hear them all talking, but it sounds very far away. This is what the voices sounded like when I was little...this is exactly what they sounded like...what pills did she give me? The nurse is flicking the tip of a syringe. The Doctor's hands are on me. He is standing at the foot of my bed, holding down my legs. The guard is lifting up my shoulders, exposing my back. Through half-closed eyes, I am looking directly at Dr. Stockill. Is he smiling at me? He nods to the nurse behind me. My hair is lifted out of the way, and I feel the needle piercing the back of my neck...



## Hospital Entry 28: THE END

I am awake. I don't know where I am. But I am awake.

I am somewhere else.

I am lying flat on a hard, narrow gurney. My eyes flutter open to see yet another awful fluorescent light buzzing overhead. There is a strap buckled across my chest, two more around my wrists, and another over my legs. My wrists are thin, like Anne Boleyn's neck, and I manage to free my hands. I unbuckle the other straps and sit upright. The room is small and painfully bright. It is a hospital room, cold and clinical, but there is nothing in it besides the metal bed with its thin blue mattress. Everything in the hospital that isn't white is blue...I think I once heard that this is because blue is the opposite of blood. There is a single door with its standard silver hospital doorknob. I step down from the bed and walk to the door, my legs quivering. I try the knob. The door is locked. It is completely quiet outside. Impossibly quiet. I knock on the door.

"Hello? Somebody?"

No answer. I am pounding on the door now.

"Somebody? Anybody? I'm awake!"

Still nothing.

"I'm awake! I want to come out!"

Dead silence. I am in a vacuum.

I am pounding on the door...on the walls. I am screaming my bloody head off...I am screaming until I can't breathe...until my voice is gone and I can make no more sound. I am exhausted...I feel like my brain is shutting down...what have they done with me?

I sink to the floor...I don't know I've been crying until I feel the tears drying on my face...I collapse in the corner, facing the wall, leaning my head on the plaster...it is far too white...blindingly white...it hurts my eyes...I lift my hand to touch the wall...I feel a tiny crack in the paint...I pick at it...bits of paint flake off onto the speckled linoleum floor...I can't stop...larger flakes are peeling off...I am tearing at the wall now...I've made a large hole in the plaster...I keep tearing...my fingers are bleeding, smearing the wall with red...finally, I sit back and look at what I've done.

Where the plaster has been torn away, I see the layer beneath...stripes...black and white...they're moving...



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